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RANCH ROMANCES

25c

FIRST OCTOBER NUMBER
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by D. S. Halacy

GHOST OF THE ROCKING R
by Ben Frank

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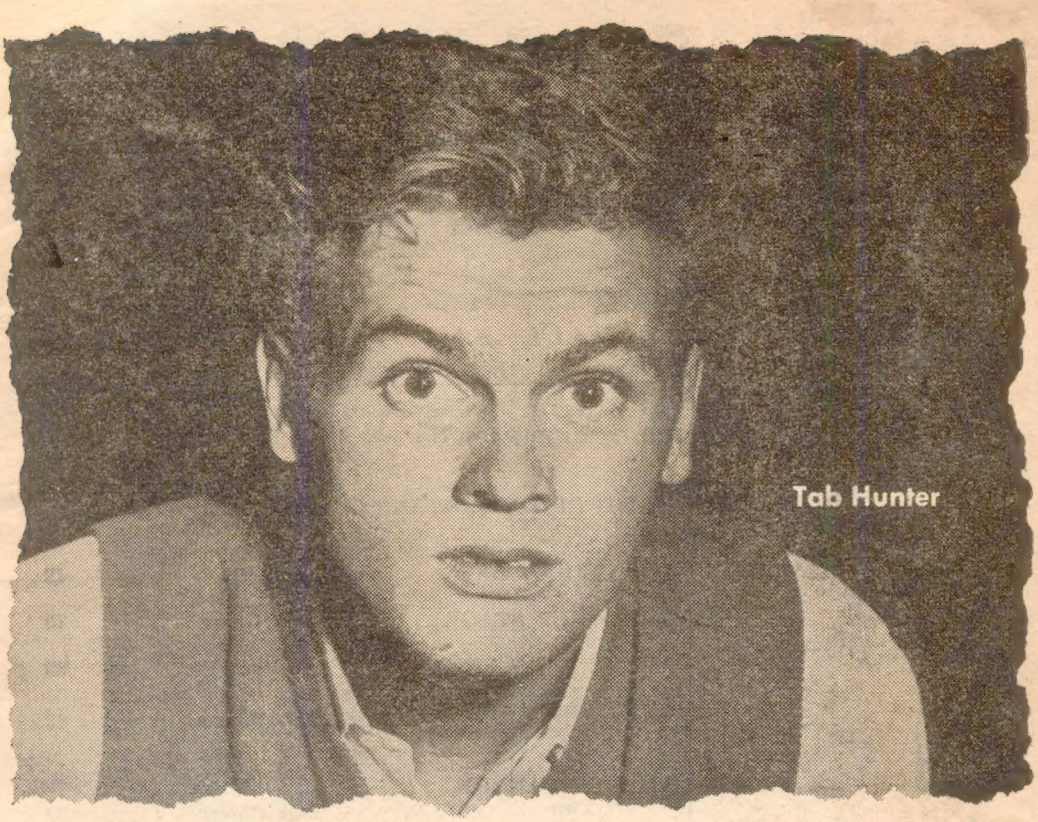

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FIRST
OCTOBER NUMBER

October 5, 1956
Volume 200, No. 4

RANCH ROMANCES

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HELEN TONO
Editor

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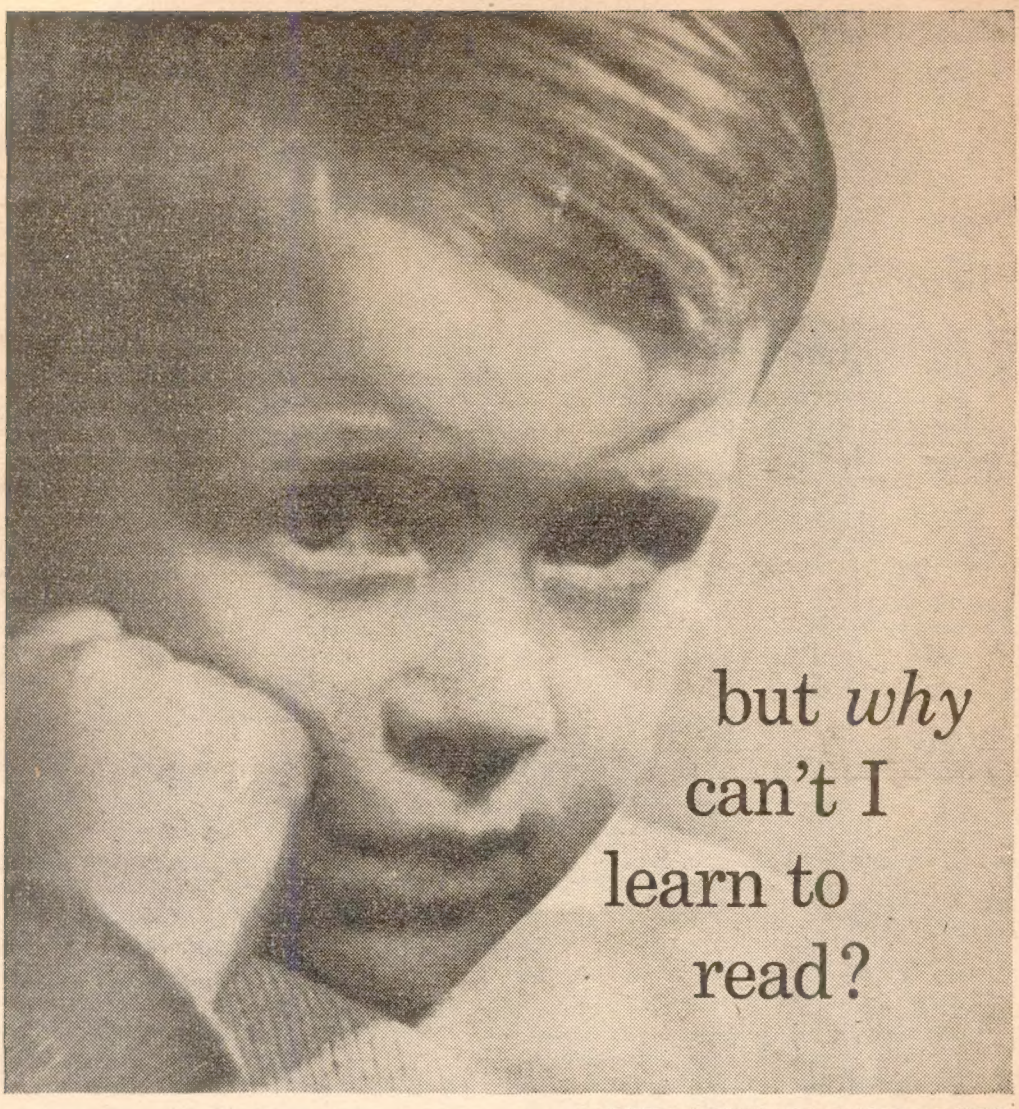

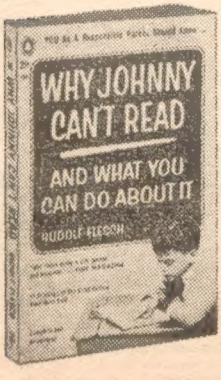

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Doesn't Give Up

Dear Editor:

This is my fourth try to get into your column. Hope I make it this time. I'm 15 years old and would like to hear from people who don't receive many letters. Would also like to receive a picture from my pen pals, and I will send one of myself back. I'd like to hear from girls of any age, and from boys between the ages of 16 and 23.

LETHA ANN KENDALL
1724 North Oregon Street
Ontario, Oregon

Rhyming Miss

Dear Editor:

I hope you won't ignore my plea,
Please publish my letter,
I'm lonely and need lots of friends
To make me feel better.
I'm lonely and I'm in ill health,
My hair: brown; amber eyes;
My weight's one hundred pounds or more,
Four feet ten, my size
So write to me, you gals and guys.

BABE LATTRALLE
Lock Box #219
Crown Point, New York

Outdoor Guy

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of RANCH ROMANCES for seven years and think it's great. I am 25 years old, weigh 156 lbs., stand 5'10½" tall and have brown hair and eyes. My hobbies include hunting, fishing, riding and boxing. Also like bebop, jazz and Western music.

ROBERT L. BUTLER
827 NW 16th
Portland, Oregon

Farm Guy

Dear Editor:

I would like to have my name in your column. I live on a farm and find it quite lonely most of the time. I am 18 years old, 5'10" tall, weigh 165 lbs., and have brown hair and eyes. Will be waiting hear from everyone.

WALTER KUJATH
Endicott, Nebraska

Calling Lonesome People

Dear Editor:

Would like to hear from all the lonesome people around, as I am lonesome and need pen pals very much. I am 30 years old, 5'4½" tall, and have reddish blonde hair and brown eyes. My favorite pastimes are going to the movies, watching sports events, listening to all kinds of music, and doing some dancing. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange photos, if you wish.

BETTYE PRIESKOP
115 Haight Street, Apt. 14
San Francisco, California

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 31 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Wants a Lot of Friends

Dear Editor:

I am 38 years old, single, 5'5" tall, weigh 140 lbs., and have brown hair and green eyes. I am a farm laborer and have worked fifteen years on farms. Am interested in hearing from ladies between the ages of 30 and 38. My hobbies include Western music, adventure stories, and movies. Would also be interested in hearing from people in Canada, Ireland, Scotland and Sweden.

GEORGE CARSON, JR.
RR 2 Box 562C
Klamath Falls, Oregon

Come On, Gang!

Dear Editor:

This is my first attempt to make your column, and I hope I succeed. I am 12 years old and stand 5' tall. My hobbies are roller skating, ice skating, listening to music, and going to the movies. So come on, gang, all those between the ages of 12 and 15, please write to me.

RONALD MIKLOS
Selby, South Dakota

Needs Letters

Dear Editor:

Please publish my plea, as I've been trying for the past few years to have my name in your column. I am 70 years old, 5'1" tall, and weigh 163 lbs. I am a widow. Will answer all letters from both men or women, whether they are young or old.

MRS. THINY R. DURDENY
109 E. Kirby
Tampa 4, Florida

Lonely Canadian Man

Dear Editor:

This is my first try to get into "Our Air Mail." I am 23 years old, 5'4" tall, and have brown hair and eyes. I am an oilfield worker. So come on, all you nice people, write to me.

SAM BLAZER
Sundre, Alberta
Canada

Relocated Person

Dear Editor:

I come from Massachusetts and have been in California for only a short time. I live on a ranch that isn't near many people, so I find it very difficult to make new friends. I am 20 years old, 5' 6½" tall, and have brown hair and eyes. Am also married. I've done some traveling, like all types of music, and really enjoy writing letters. Would like to hear from everyone, regardless of age, race or religion.

MRS. DUDE THORNE

101 Ranch
Paicines, California

Wants Letters

Dear Editor:

I am hoping that there is room in your column for my plea. I am 37 years old and quite lonely. Would like especially to hear from girls between the ages of 21 and 37, but will gladly answer all letters. Will also exchange snapshots with those who desire. So come on and write to me.

WILSON J. LOPEZ

138 South 18th Street
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Stay At Home

Dear Editor:

I am sick and can't go to school. I am 16 years old, 5'5" tall, and have black hair and brown eyes. My hobby is collecting records. Would like very much to hear from boys and girls between the ages of 16 and 25. Promise to answer all letters that I receive.

BETTY SUE MARTIN

337 Texas Street
Sulphur Springs, Texas

Handicapped Person

Dear Editor:

Since I have had polio, I have been reading many magazines, and like RANCH ROMANCES the most. I am 25 years old, 5'1" tall, weigh 98 lbs., and have light brown hair and gray eyes. I love to travel and take pictures of the places that I've been to. Will answer all letters, but I particularly would like to hear from guys and gals who have had polio or other ailments.

FAYE HAIRRELL

701 West Jackson
Hugo, Oklahoma

Serviceman

Dear Editor:

Will you please enter my name in your Air Mail section? I am 25 years old, 5'7" tall, and have blond hair and blue eyes. Would like to receive letters from girls between the ages of 18 and 25. I will answer all letters that come my way.

S/SGT. KENNETH V. MARTIN

AF 27023845 Box 0-20
68th Fighter Interceptor Squadron
APO-244, San Francisco, California

Interesting Correspondent

Dear Editor:

I would appreciate it if you would print my letter in your Air Mail column. I am 30 years old and have traveled extensively throughout Mexico, Guatemala and the United States. My interests are the fine arts: classical music, opera, and drama. I shall answer all letters, and will be glad to exchange photographs.

W. KERMIT SNELL

P. O. Box 50
Fort Steilacoom, Washington

Lonely Marine

Dear Editor:

I am a frequent reader of RANCH ROMANCES and desire to have my name added to "Our Air Mail." I am a Marine stationed in Okinawa, and feel very lonely being so far from home. I am 6' tall, weigh 185 lbs., and have a dark suntan. Will answer all letters and exchange snapshots.

LEONARD H. FARRELL, 1504622

Hq Co Hq Bn (Bn Off)
3d Marine Division (Reinf) FMF
c/o FPO San Francisco, California

Has Hobbies

Dear Editor:

Could a lonely mother join your circle? I have three girls and two boys who are all nearly grown. My hubby has heart trouble and we have to stay at home a good deal of the time, so I would have a lot of time to answer letters. I am 38 years old, 5'7" tall, and have dark brown hair and hazel eyes. My hobbies include collecting little figures of dogs, doing embroidery work and—oh, yes, I'm an avid hillbilly fan.

RESSIE ROBERTSON

Siluis, Illinois

Long-time Reader

Dear Editor:

I have read RANCH ROMANCES for the last 30 years. Now that I am a widow, 49 years old, with my family nearly grown, letter writing seems to appeal to me. I like most sports. Would especially like to acquire pen pals from the male sex, but all will be welcome.

LULA T. McCULLY

486-26th Street
Apt. 12
Ogden, Utah

Trying Again

Dear Editor:

Here I am, again trying to get into your column. I hope this time I succeed. I am 27 years old, 5' tall, and have brown hair and blue-gray eyes. Would especially like to hear from people of Spanish and French descent, but will answer all letters. My hobby is collecting postcards.

LUCILE THOMAS

209-C 21st Street N.
Alabama City, Alabama

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TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

NEIGHBORS of a Yakima, Wash., man think his half-block-long fence is an eyesore and would like him to tear it down. He's rather proud of it, though; he made it himself, out of a thousand mop handles, painted all the colors of the rainbow.

AS AN excuse for her absence from her eighth-grade classes, a 13-year-old Santa Paula, Calif., girl explained that she needed time off to marry her 18-year-old fiance.

REPLYING to letters protesting the "inhuman" killing of rabbits by clubbing them, a Topeka, Kans., official presented the following defense: "It finally gets down to the situation where it's either us or the rabbits."

POLICE in Dallas, Tex., are seeking a prankster who tied a note to a rock and then hurled the rock through the window of a home. The note read, "Your window is broken."

NOTICING the man next to her in a church pew slump forward, apparently in a faint, a Wahpeton, N.D., woman told him he'd feel better if the blood could get to his head. She placed her hand on the back of his neck to push his head down, whereupon the man sputtered, "Lady, I'm only trying to find my hat."

WORRIED, a Butte, Mont., woman phoned the police that her husband was "out on on the town" with their dog. She didn't care about her husband, but she begged police to find the dog, which was under a doctor's care.

TALKING over a Sunday School lesson with her daughter, a Long Beach, Calif., mother confirmed the teacher's saying that before people are born they are dust and they return to dust when they die. The child countered with, "Well, I just looked under my bed, and someone is either coming or going."

RETURNING from a hospital stay, a Black River Falls, Wis., mother found three dozen frogs in her bathtub. Her son had collected them as a welcome-home gift, because he had once heard her say she liked the sound of croaking frogs.

PRISONERS in the Comanche County, Okla., jail got some hack saw blades smuggled in, but they didn't try to escape. They sawed their way into an adjacent vault where liquor was stored, helped themselves, and had a celebration.

IN DETROIT, Mich., a 10-year-old boy was saved by the pizza pie he had been holding while riding in a car. When the car made a sharp turn, the door flew open and the boy fell out and skidded across the street—on top of the pie. His only injury was a bruised knee.

RANCH
FLICKER TALK

by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

Secret of Treasure Mountain

Three mysterious crosses point the way to a hidden gold horde and an Apache curse, in Columbia's thrill-packed new action movie

A HUNT for buried treasure, I'd say, is just about the most exciting theme a movie can have. Maybe it's because all of us have a yen to go look for some, but few of us ever have the chance. So the next best thing is to join in the search at our local movie theater.

If you're among the frustrated treasure hunters, you have a treat in store when you see *Secret of Treasure Mountain*, a new Columbia release starring William Prince and Valerie French.

It's a Western tale of three bad men who stumble upon clues to a hoard of gold hidden by Spaniards 200 years ago. Two of the men are bank robbers—Raymond Burr and Rudolfo Hoyos; the third, William Prince, is merely a bit harum-scarum. His worst offense against the law was getting mixed up in a saloon brawl.

But Bill has a posse after him for this scrape. So he joins forces with the two bank robbers, and together they seek a hideout with an old prospector and his daughter, played by Reginald Sheffield and Valerie French.

During their stay, Raymond Burr finds a gold cross which belongs to the pretty young Apache housekeeper, Susan Cummings (no kin to yours truly). From the prospector they learn the story of the treasure. Legend has it that three gold crosses are the key to its hiding place. The prospector believes that this is one of the crosses, and that the other two will be found nearby. When they are, he says, they will point the way to untold millions.

He warns, however, that the Apaches have put a curse on the treasure, threatening death to any white man who finds it. But Indian witchcraft shakes no one's determination to find millions in gold. Step by step the crosses are uncovered, and with each clue comes trickery, deception, and murder. At the end of the search lies the treasure—and the Apaches' curse.

Secret of Treasure Mountain is William Prince's first movie after several years away

from Hollywood, during which time he specialized in Broadway plays and television.

He said it was good to be back. "You've no idea how free you feel, acting outdoors, instead of being confined to a stage or cooped up in a TV studio."

Of course, he found hazards connected with movie-making that he didn't run into in the other mediums. Getting bitten by a rattlesnake is one of them. The incident was called for in the script, though Bill didn't actually get bitten. However, it's fairly nerve-wracking just to know a rattlesnake is going to come close. On the day the scene was to be shot, Bill had steeled himself for the ordeal. But he needn't have bothered, because the rattlesnake just plain wasn't interested.

The trouble was, an expert explained, that the snake was cold. Having been moved from toasty quarters in a private zoo to the chilly outdoors, it wanted only to hibernate. Finally the scene had to be shot indoors. By this time Bill was so worried about the scene that he didn't worry about the bite. But all went well on the first take, and no one was hurt.

There was also a balky burro involved in the picture. His name is Julius, and he is a veteran of many movies. But he felt that his part in *Secret of Treasure Mountain,* requiring him to haul portly Raymond Burr up a rocky slope, was too strenuous. Sugar and hay, held out of camera range, was not sufficient inducement to make him do the job. But a lady donkey named Mercedes, staked out at the top of the hill, was. Love conquers all.

While I'm on the subject of animals, I may as well tell you one bit of incidental information I picked up on the set. If you've ever wondered how horses get all lathered up in Westerns, I can now put your mind at rest. The lather is a mixture of whipped cream and barley, sprayed on with a pressure container.

This combination was discovered by a lather expert, a man named Frank Travis, who used to be a barber. He says there's hardly a Western that doesn't require a horse to lather up at some point. But whipped cream and barley must be a lot pleasanter for the ponies than working up their own lather.

William Prince watches as Valerie French pours for Raymond Burr

VALERIE FRENCH
Belle From Britain

RANCH FLICKER TALK

AFTER a chat with Valerie French, the new British import, I'm convinced that she'll probably set Hollywood on its ear.

She's a girl of strong opinions, not to say prejudices, and she has no reluctance about voicing them. She will tell you in her clipped accent that she loathes bad manners, second bests, and party games.

She has sophisticated tastes in food, insisting on wine with dinner—and the right wine, of good vintage, at that. She says she could live on champagne and caviar.

But there's another side to her, too, and she doesn't care who knows about that either. It's her homebody side, which is best illustrated by her "little cottage on the Thames" in London. She loves to describe how she has combined modern fabrics with antique furniture there, and she has a slight tendency to brag about her dining alcove, which she papered with her own two hands.

It takes quite a background to make a girl like Valerie, and her's was unusually colorful.

The first dramatic occurrence and the narrowest escape happened when she was four and a playful little boy swung an ax at her. She got away without any physical injuries, but lost her long curls in her flight.

What affected her early life much more strongly around this time was her mother's concern over her father. He was an accountant for a British-owned copper mine in Spain, and during the Civil War there he was taken captive by Franco's troops as a British spy. Eventually, after months of worry, the family learned that he had proved his innocence and had been set free.

Next the war came along, and Valerie's burning desire was to join the WAF, the feminine counterpart to the RAF. She was too young to be accepted, but she made a contribution to the war all the same as a member of a corps of volunteer farm helpers.

"It doesn't sound very glamorous to say you spent the war picking fruit and peas," says Valerie, "but it was better than doing nothing."

She had always wanted to be an actress, and when her pea-picking days were over she got a job with a repertory company.

Afterward she got a small movie role in England, and then, in a roundabout way, along came her big break. She made a screen test for a part in *Bhowani Junction*, but when she inquired about whether she'd gotten the part, she was informed that it had been cut from the movie. No one seemed to know what had happened to her test, except that it had been sent to Hollywood.

A less determined girl might have decided that was that, but Valerie wrote to a producer she'd heard of and asked him to find the test, look at it, and at least tell her if it was good or bad.

The producer did that, and went even a step further. He showed it to a talent executive at Columbia. Valerie was never told in so many words whether the test was good or bad. But she could make an accurate guess, because the next letter from Hollywood contained an airline ticket.

She has made two movies for Columbia so far—*Jubal* and *The Secret of Treasure Mountain*, both Westerns. She has enjoyed playing in both of them, except that she wishes her parts weren't so seductive.

"I would like movie fans to know I'm just a nice, simple girl," she insists. "I really love California—especially the sunshine."

Adding to her list of likes and dislikes (all strong, as I mentioned earlier) she expressed a fondness for indoor plants, travel, and buttermilk. She's against the high cost of living, and any mention of flying saucers.

Columbia

Valerie is a determined miss who manages to get what she wants

LINDSEY WESTPHAL let the two horses turn into the road that led to the Patterson place, smiling down at the girl alongside him on the seat of the spring wagon. Dora Patterson smiled in return, her expression showing female curiosity, and leaned a little closer.

"What is it, Lin?" she asked, her voice soft and relaxed, with the husky sweetness that reminded him somehow of her taffy-colored hair. "Did I say something?"

"Right," Lin told her. "You said 'Yes' a while back. Remember?"

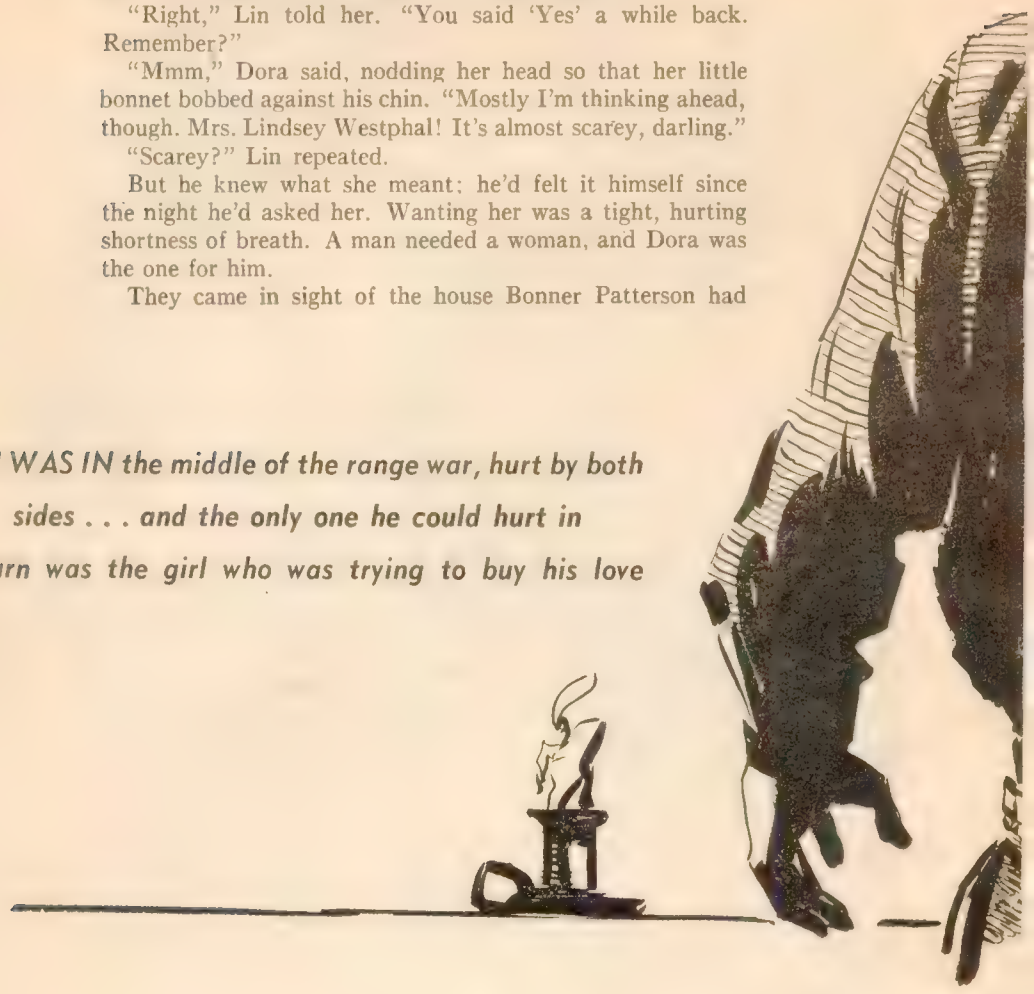
"Mmm," Dora said, nodding her head so that her little bonnet bobbed against his chin. "Mostly I'm thinking ahead, though. Mrs. Lindsey Westphal! It's almost scarey, darling."

"Scarey?" Lin repeated.

But he knew what she meant; he'd felt it himself since the night he'd asked her. Wanting her was a tight, hurting shortness of breath. A man needed a woman, and Dora was the one for him.

They came in sight of the house Bonner Patterson had

LIN WAS IN the middle of the range war, hurt by both sides . . . and the only one he could hurt in return was the girl who was trying to buy his love



Righteous

Ramrod

by D. S. HALACY

built his family on the half section he called a ranch, and Lin took his arm from about the girl reluctantly. She moved properly away from him and sat looking straight ahead as they drove into the yard. Several chickens flew up, squawking as the team pulled up to the barn.

"Sorry you couldn't find the material you had your heart set on, Dora," Lin said. "But we did—"

He heard the sound then, the awful sobbing of a woman in near-hysteria. The wail broke into his consciousness, tearing apart the joy he had felt a moment before. He stepped to the ground and reached up to help Dora down. She was running then, her skirts lifted with both hands, her foolish little hat hanging down by its ribbons as she hurried wordlessly toward the house.

Frowning, Lin trotted after her. There were few sounds that cut into a man like this kind of crying, and he knew from past experience that nothing trivial had prompted it. Without turning his head, he saw the saddle horses standing near the porch, and wondered whose they were. Then there was no time for speculation, for Dora was inside. As Lin's boots hit the steps, he heard her scream.

"Dad! Oh Daddy, no!"

As he opened the screen door he saw her on her knees at the sofa, her face buried against the chest of the man lying across it, his boots dangling on the floor. The man was Bonner Patterson, his bearded face stiff and ashen in the final grip of death. Dora was crying now, her sobs merging with those coming from another room.

"Dora, please."

He started across the room, but was halted by an arm on his shoulder. Turning, he saw the square, homely face of Vance Brady, a puncher who had ridden for Lin until the cutback on the ranch where Lin was foreman, the XT. With his hat off the man looked strange; or it might have been his emotion that seemed to sharpen his features.

"You can't do her any good, Westphal," Brady told him. "Nobody can, though the womenfolk will try. He's dead, and she's not going to have anything good to say to you when she finds out how he got it. Come on outside."

A vicious bitterness coursed through Lin as what Vance was telling him sank in. The dream had been too bright; this was the waking up, the harsh light of morning. Turning away from the pathetic scene, Lin followed Brady from the room, easing the screen shut behind him quietly.

There were three other men there. He thought of the knot of horses he'd seen. There were five, so one must have been the old man's mount for his last ride. Lin knew the men who were now eying him silently. Akers and Fremont were small cattlemen; Mike Ferraday, squatting on his bootheels to trace a design in the dirt with a small switch, rode and drank with Vance. When XT, paring its forces, had paid Vance off, Ferraday had come into the office and quit. He was a little man, a hanger-on who seemed to find a prop in his big friend.

"All right, Vance," Lin said, hooking his thumbs in his belt. "How *did* he get it?"

He was afraid he knew without being told. Bonner Patterson had been a fool, and a poor man. The combination was dangerous.

"Call me Brady, you hear? I'm not one of your flunkies any more, Westphal." Vance Brady's eyes were almost triumphant, as though leaving XT had been an achievement to be proud of. "And I reckon you know how the old man caught lead. He had the guts to claim some cows you stole, so the XT bunch shot him."

There was a grunt of assent that went around the circle of staring, accusing faces. Ferraday stood as if at a pre-arranged signal, his eyes flicking to Brady and then back to Lin. Every one of them was armed, and it was evident they wanted him to notice the fact.

"Somebody on XT shot Patterson?" Lin asked dully. He wanted to stall for time, and yet he knew there was no sense in that. "There must be some mistake, some explanation."

"It was a mistake, all right," Boyce Akers said, emotion overcoming his natural reticence. "And the explanation is that that damn bunch on XT thinks it has a God-given right to trample us small ranchers into the dirt. Look, Westphal, I have no quarrel with you; you've always played it square with me. What we've been thinking—"

HE TRAILED off, looking around as if for support, and Fremont mumbled something to Brady. The puncher nodded and eyed Lin with new awareness of his importance.

"We're going to break XT, Westphal," he said softly. "Like Akers says, that skunk Campbell thinks he's a damned king or something, and the country is fed up. We're giving you a break. Patterson's getting killed is sort of in the family for you, and we figured you'd rather be with us than against us."

"That's about it, Westphal," Fremont said. He acted like a man who is afraid somebody will see him scheming at something. "We know you'll want to help apprehend Patterson's murderer."

"We have law to run down the murderer," Lin said. The crying of the two women still pierced his brain, and he wished they would stop. It was a hell of a thing, how fast the picture could change. "If an XT man is guilty, he'll pay for it."

"We figure *every* XT man is guilty, Westphal," Brady said coldly, "so you'd better think fast. Akers and Fremont want to pool their herds, and they're willing to hire you to ramrod for them." He turned and spat into the dirt, then grinned. "I'd take the job myself, but I have an interest in Patterson's holding, and now that's going to keep me busy. So you're lucky. Only the offer doesn't hold for long, see?"

"I'd better ride out," Lin said. "Standing here talking isn't getting anything done. Thanks for the job offer, gentlemen, but I have a job now. My contract runs another six months."

"At two hundred a month," Ferraday sneered. "Maybe you're royalty too, Westphal. Look at that pretty suit you're wearing, and the dude hat. Maybe we're too small for you, huh? Too common."

"Will you tell Dora I've gone to XT to find out what happened, Brady? I'll be back to see if there's anything I can do to help."

Lin felt like a yellow coward running away from the girl in her anguish, but there was nothing he could do to still the crying. And he'd be better able to explain things when he knew what had happened himself.

"I'll tell Dora," Brady said, and a thin smile went with the words. "I'll tell her you've gone back to XT, eh?"

Lin rode out of the Patterson place with the sound of grieving still in his ears. It was late afternoon, with the shade of cottonwoods slanting along the fields. His horse was fresh, and he put the spurs to him, eager to reach the ranch and find out about the shooting. Then he could worry about the law, and about Stanley Campbell, the thin, cold-eyed owner of XT, the largest spread in the Panhandle country.

He could see the lights of the ranch a long way off, and smell the cook's fire for some time before he got there. It was nine o'clock by the time he stamped into the ranchhouse and yelled for Pierce Cobbet, his top hand. Lin hung up his hat and got out of the tight coat he had worn for the shopping trip with Dora. By then the XT puncher was there, a matchstick of a man with a salt-and-pepper mustache and watery blue eyes.

"Yeah, boss?" Cobbet had come from the supper table. He had a toothpick stabbing from a corner of his mouth.

"Start talking," Lin told him. He pointed to a chair. "You'd better sit down. I want it all."

"You've already heard about it? I'm sorry, boss, sorry as hell."

"You'll be sorrier when I get through with you. What happened?"

"It was down along our south fence, boss. I guess Patterson had a small herd bedded on that common pasture. He got the bright idea of running off a dozen head of our new stuff, but the boys caught him before he got away. It was just a freak that they ran into him. I reckon now it'd have been better if they hadn't."

"Are you positive of this? Who did the gunning?"

"I'm positive," Cobbet said. "And Patterson did the first shooting. Whitey Lake is in the bunkhouse now with a slug in his chest. Doc says he'll be all right. Whitey had asked the old man to hold it till they could check brands. Patterson told him to go to hell. So Whitey went in to cut the cows back. Patterson shot him with his rifle."

"Then what?"

"Hell, boss, you'd have done the same thing

—I don't care how much we want to keep out of trouble. When Jerry saw his brother pitch off the horse, he let the old man have it. After all the talking you did on the subject, either of the Lake boys would have let the old man get away with the cows rather than let this happen. But when Patterson blasted Whitey out of the saddle—" The little rider

pulled the toothpick from his mouth disgustedly and snapped it between his thumb and fingers.

"I'm going to see Whitey," Lin said tightly. "Did you call in the law yet?"

"Mr. Campbell did that," Cobbet said.

"Campbell? I thought he was in Austin." Lin stopped in his tracks, glaring at the puncher.

"He's back," Cobbet said. "And I'd say he didn't do any good there, judging by how he ranted around here. He went to see the law. He said he'd meet you on the way."

"I came back by way of Patterson's," Lin said heavily. The news that the owner of XT was back was hard to take. Campbell was a mad bull when times were good. This would be a red flag flaunted in his face, and Lin was in the middle of it. "All right, I'm going to see how Whitey is. Where's Jerry?"

"He, uh—" Cobbet wet his lips and studied his boots. "I don't rightly know, boss." When he looked up, his eyes moved nervously from side to side.

"Hell!" Lin said in disgust, and left the room.

Hurrying across the yard, he came to the bunkhouse. Whitey Lake lay in his own bunk, his eyes closed.

"Whitey?" Lin called, bending over the rider. Slowly the eyes opened. "How are you, feller?"

"Rough, Lin," Whitey said. "That old man didn't miss. I'm sorry, about the girl and all, I mean. But those were our cows; I couldn't just sit there and let Patterson run them off." He gasped for breath and lifted a hand to his chest.

"Take it easy, Whitey," Lin said. "Do you want a smoke?"

"Not unless you're going to puff it for me," the injured man said sheepishly. "I feel like I'm breathing fire now."

"Doc says you'll pull through," Lin said. "One more question, and then I'll leave you alone. You're positive they couldn't have been Patterson's stock?"

"Look," Whitey said. He sighed long and patiently. "I just ride for the outfit. It's a job, and I'm not going to say I have a soft spot in my heart for Campbell, either. If there'd been any doubt, do you think I'd have made my play? A dozen cows wouldn't put XT under. Man, I was positive. The old man was stealing, sure as I'm lying here with a slug in my craw."

"All right, Whitey. Just so you're sure you didn't shoot first—you or Jerry."

"That's something else," Whitey said, sudden concern showing in his pallid face. "Don't let anything happen to the kid, will you? He's all I have, Lin, and what he did he had to do. He wouldn't shoot a rabbit unless he was starving to death."

"You get rested, Whitey. If there's anything you want, let me know. I'll see that Doc takes care of you. And don't worry." He stepped back from the bunk, wishing it were that easy. Just don't worry; what a joke that was.

OUTSIDE, he heard trotting horses, and a sharp curse. A door slammed as Lin came out of the bunkhouse, and as he crossed the yard a light went on in the office in the ranchhouse. It flared and then steadied. Stanley Campbell was back, and Lin braced himself as he went up onto the porch. For all that he was fair, the XT owner was a hard and merciless man. And there was reason now to vent all his anger.

As Lin pushed open the office door, Campbell looked up from the litter of papers he was wrestling across the desk. Sharp-featured, nearly bald, the XT's owner was a paradox. He swore up and down that he hated every second he spent on the ranch, and yet he wouldn't sell if someone had offered him a million for his holdings.

"Where in thunder have you been?" he roared, straightening up and letting the papers in his hand fall in an untidy heap. "Are you running this place for me or not, Westphal?"

"That's what I'm under contract for," Lin said dryly. "I've been running XT. We weren't expecting you back for another week."

"Aye, and it's lucky you were wrong, too. Another week and I'd have had naught left but troubles, mister! But maybe it's as well the thing has come to a head. These blasted "common people" have a lesson coming to them, and I'll teach them."

"Cobbet says you've been to report this to the law," Lin said.

"True," Campbell said, smiling coldly, "and to remind the law of a thing or two—money-wise, that is."

"There was no need of that," Lin said. "Jerry will be cleared by any court. I'm not worried about him."

"That makes two of us, Westphal," Campbell said, his smile warming a bit. "Jerry Lake is no longer with XT, our hands are clean. I'm taking no chances."

"What!" Lin shouted. "Is that the kind of loyalty you show your hands after they get shot up looking after your cattle? I didn't think that of you, Campbell."

"Steady, mister. The boy's a bit the richer, I assure you. And he'll be back when things are tidied up around here. The sheriff is looking the other way while Lake rides for New Mexico. We've got rid of a troublemaker, Patterson; perhaps the others will think twice now. There's only one thing troubling me, Westphal." Campbell's scowl came back, wrinkling his smooth-shaven face and making slits of his black eyes.

"It had to be Patterson," Lin said bitterly. "The father of the girl I plan to marry."

"Plan? You mean planned, don't you Westphal?" Campbell sank down into the swivel chair, something like a taunt on his face now.

"I'm going to try to make her see my side of this," Lin said. "If Jerry Lake stands trial, so the country could know the truth, maybe

Dora will see things as they are. Right now she's bitter, I know. They're all bitter, all the small operators, Campbell. And now they have a rallying point." It came to him then that men on both sides of XT fence were glad about the killing of Patterson.

"Who in particular, Westphal?" Campbell said, his interest flaring. "You seem to get around."

"I took Dora home," Lin said crisply. "There were a bunch there, the men who brought Bonner Patterson in. And they're out to finish you, Campbell."

Lin looked straight into the eyes of the man who paid him, the man who had brought him up from punching cows for twenty-five a month to top hand, and then foreman. Campbell was square; Lin knew that. And two hundred a month was a lot of money. Yet it wasn't the money that made Lin tell his boss all he knew. It was something else, part of what kept him from lying or cheating a man.

"As a matter of fact, they offered me the job of bossing a merger of Akers and Fremont herds. There's not much money in it, but maybe it would be a damned sight healthier. Besides that, I have more friends among the small ranchers than I have here."

"I know," Campbell said, the taunt strong in his tone. "And XT doesn't have a woman on the place." He stood up and moved out from behind the desk. "Maybe you and I have come to the end of the road, Westphal."

His shoulders sagged suddenly. He buried a boney fist in his palm and twisted it slowly. He sounded tired when he spoke again, and he looked older, more like the fifty he was.

"Well, they picked a good man," he said when he looked up. "I have a lot of respect for you in spite of all the rows we've had. Like that business of voting for Judge Rouse. Telling me to go to hell made me respect you a lot more, son. And I won't try to buy you by raising your pay now; I know it wouldn't work. As you say, you have a lot of interests on the far side of XT fence. It's your decision."

Lin was seeing a lot more than a thin cattleman in striped broadcloth as he looked across the room at Campbell. There was rugged strength in the face backlighted by the lamp that lit the office. The XT's owner had turned the thousands of acres of wasteland into a paying ranch in the years since he bought the barren stretch along the New Mexico border.

The legislature had boasted of fleecing the Northerner, Campbell, and for a time it looked as though he would go under. There were wells to dig, tanks to carve out, and fence to put up and maintain against fire and nesters, who came in with the railroad—which Campbell himself was mainly responsible for building.

MEN rode for Campbell, and stole his beef on the side, setting themselves up finally as small operators. And immigrants cut his fences, butchered his stock, and squalled like stuck pigs when he ran them off. Now there were more "little" men, and each had a vote. They were glad that Campbell and his money had opened up the new land; but now the pressure was on him to clear out.

It was these thoughts that finally brought the answer to Lin's lips. Campbell was right; money couldn't buy him. But not even the thought of Dora Patterson and how much he wanted her could make him slight a duty, and duty was before him.

"I have a contract, Campbell," he said. "Remember? It runs until January, I think. I told you they offered me a job, not that I'd taken it. And one other thing—"

He moved a step closer to Campbell, watching the odd look that was forming itself on the smooth face. Reaching out, he tapped his boss on the chest to make his point.

"I voted for Rouse that time, but not because you told me to. I make my own decisions, Campbell—just as I'm making this one."

Campbell was in the bunkhouse at sunup next morning, clean-shaved and fresh-looking. His voice was controlled as he gave orders, and Lin had to admire the man. Even with his back to the wall, the owner commanded respect.

"I'm backing you men to the hilt," he said, his eyes moving to take in every puncher. "If you haven't been wearing handguns, start now.

Draw all the ammunition you need, and work in pairs. I don't expect any more trouble; in fact I want you to see there is none."

There was no comment. Someone scratched a match on top of the stove in the silence that followed. Campbell drew in his breath and went on.

"I realize we're shorthanded, and I'm taking steps to rectify that. Meantime, don't try to be heroes, and don't make any wrong moves. I'll be as hard on you for that as I would be on a town man. Any questions?"

"I have one." There was a rustle of movement as the cowboys turned to look at Whitey Lake. "Have you heard anything about my kid brother yet?"

"He's all right," Campbell said confidently. "If you like, you can join him as soon as you're up. All you have to do is tell the sheriff a straight story when he comes out here today. Anybody else?"

There was no more questioning, and he dismissed them crisply. Then he fell in alongside Lin as they walked toward the ranchhouse for breakfast.

"I'd better get over to White Tanks and check on that stuff we're shipping," Lin said. From the tanks it wasn't far to the Patterson place, and he had to see Dora.

"Forget the tanks," Campbell said, smiling thinly. "I'll send Cobbet. I know you want to see that girl, though I think you're a fool, after what's happened. There's an errand you can run for me, since you're going that way."

Lin nodded agreement, wondering if his face were that transparent or if Campbell had read his mind. The owner was shrewd. Breakfast passed silently, and then Lin went into the office, wondering about the errand Campbell had mentioned.

"I'd do this myself, Westphal," the boss said, his face tightly sober, "but for a couple of reasons. When I tell you this envelope is for Carl Sims, you'll know what I mean. People might misread my friendliness with the editor of the newspaper." A cold smile lifted the corners of his mouth. "I'm also *persona non grata* as far as Helen Sims is concerned. There's no fool like an old one, Westphal, take it from me. But a man's got to try."

"I'm to give this to Sims," Lin said, taking the envelope and hefting it. "That's all?"

"That's all. The green stuff will talk for me. You could do it discreetly—say deliver it to his house, instead of the office, preferably after dark."

"Look," Lin said, "I was hired to run a ranch, not to bribe the press. You're playing with dynamite, Campbell. I still figure we can ride this thing out square and honest."

"That's because you're Lin Westphal," Campbell said bitterly. "I'll be polite and say you're an idealist. You're young and you can see two sides to anything, right and wrong. I've been there, son. When you have too, you'll have more sympathy for me. But to salve your conscience, there's nothing wrong with an investment, is there? The county needs a newspaper, and if Sims doesn't get backing he'll go under."

"And in return he colors the news for your benefit?" Lin said harshly.

"Let's say he'll just print it in black and white," Campbell said. "He won't color it to suit someone else. You can still walk out on that contract, by the way. That's one place I'll go along with your naive philosophy. You're either for XT or you're against it. Now's the time to sound off."

"I'll see you when I get back," Lin said, easing the envelope into his coat pocket.

He could see Campbell's reasoning. As editor, Sims would have an ax of some sort to grind. Why not keep it a double-edged one? He turned on his heel and went out of the office.

HE SADDLED his black and rode out of the ranchyard, facing the thought of seeing Dora again. It had been just a day since he had left her weeping over her dead father, and yet it seemed like an age. He rode the same trail to town, breathed the same air, and watched the same rimrock and rises in the distance, but it was all changed. Instead of happiness and a looking forward to the future, he harbored doubt and tenseness as he rode toward the Patterson place.

Two riders took form, coming toward him, and he dropped a hand almost nervously to his gun. It was the sheriff and a deputy, and they talked for a bit.

"It's kind of rough on you, Lin," the man with the star said, pulling at his stained mus-

taches. "We were sort of expecting a wedding shortly."

"Bonner Patterson is dead," Lin said bluntly. "You can't hurt a man worse than that, I guess."

"I hear Whitey is laid up, and his kid brother hit the trail," the sheriff said, studying the saddlehorn before him. "In a way, that simplifies everything. It gives folks a chance to cool down."

"Let's hope so," Lin said, reining off. "I'll be in town most of the day, if you need me."

"Don't reckon I will, Lin. A man's been killed in what looks like self-defense; the killer has disappeared. We can't have a trial, that I can see. It'll blow over. Come on, Joe."

Maybe Campbell had played it smart, Lin thought, as he neared the Patterson house. Maybe with Sims to work on public opinion through the paper, the thing could die out. Lin was supposed to hire two men in town to take the Lake brothers' place, and that would be a help. A man wouldn't fight his bread and butter, and jobs were scarce in the county.

From the turn-off, the house looked as it always had. Stock moved in the fenced plot back of the barn, and the chickens scrabbled in the dirt near the house. It was hard to reconcile it with what had happened the day before. He tensed himself against the idea that a woman might soon begin to wail. But no sound came as he walked his horse into the yard.

"Dora?"

He called her name as he got out of the saddle, not wanting to startle her. There was no answer, though he heard noise from inside the house. He went up the steps, stopping at the door to rap lightly and call out again.

"Lin!"

He heard her cry out shrilly, and there was the sound of dishes splashing into the water. He opened the door as she came into the room, wiping her hands on a dishtowel, and longing filled him. Even in levis and a faded man's shirt she was beautiful. Her blonde hair was caught up behind with a wide ribbon, and her eyes brimmed with tears.

"I prayed you'd come back, Lin! Oh, Lin!"

She was in his arms then, her body pressing tight against him as sobs shook her. With one hand he cradled her head against his chest, while the other moved gently up and down her back as he tried to comfort her. The skin was soft and warm under his fingers, and the pressure of her sent fire through him.

"I love you, Dora," he whispered into the thick mass of gold hair. "We'll work things out together."

She drew back at last, and he slid his hands down her sides until they fitted the delicate curve of her waist. Embarrassed, she wiped at her eyes with both palms and then leaned close again.

"I knew you'd come back, Lin, no matter what Vance Brady said! We'll fight them, won't we, Lin? We'll make them pay for murdering Dad."

The realization stiffened him so that she felt it in his fingers gripping her waist. She must have read it in his eyes too, even before he said a word. The shock drove out the warm contentment he had clung to so briefly.

"Dora, look—"

He broke off, finding it ten times as hard as he had thought it would be. Then he plunged on in the face of the helpless stare she gave him, knowing he must trust to her love for him to make her understand.

"Come away with me," he said, as gently as he could. "Your father made a mistake, maybe an honest one, Dora, but he wasn't murdered. I'd cut off my right hand if I could call him back, but I can't. He shot first. Whitey Lake may never ride again."

"You're lying, Lin!" Dora said, her voice barely audible. She pulled free of him now and took a step backward, her head moving slowly from side to side as if she couldn't accept this as real. "XT killed Dad because he was a threat to their power. They tried to ruin him just like—"

She stopped short, and the look on her face changed from consternation to an agonizingly slow acceptance that Lin was an enemy. It ripped him apart, and he moved toward her, his hands reaching out as though he could make her believe him by his touch.

"Dora, I'm sorry. Believe me, darling. But my pity and your grief don't change the truth. You've twisted it backward, and I can understand that. But in time you'll see my side of it."

"Vance Brady was right," she said, her voice cold and empty. She evaded him, and he watched her bring her hands together, work at the ring on her finger. "Dad said I was a fool, but I prayed that— Oh, what a fool I *really* was! I hate you, Lin Westphal! You're a murderer, like they say you are. You must have plotted this with that devil Campbell you work for!"

"Dora, for God's sake!"

"Don't blaspheme the Lord! Here, take back your ring and get out of here. Did you really think I'd forsake my kind of people and become part of the filth and rottenness of XT? I thought what happened would open your eyes, and you'd join us the way I want you to. Get out!"

BEFORE he could stop her, she flung the ring at his feet and whirled toward the rifle on the wall back of the sofa. When she turned she had it cradled in her arms, the hammer back and her muscles tight under her rolled-up sleeves.

"Go on, get out of here before I forget it isn't right to kill, Lin!"

"Dora, be sensible," he said desperately.

He had to make her see reason, or it was all gone—all the dreams and plans they had made. He couldn't let the warmth of the beautiful girl before him turn into the bitterness of hate. But as the gun levelled on him and he read the set of her mouth, fear touched him and made him move backward toward the door. She meant every word she was saying. Grief had made her lose touch. She believed the lies Brady had pumped into her, believed them to the point that she would kill the man she had planned to marry.

"Go away," she said in a bitter whisper. "Next time you come here I swear I'll kill you, Lin Westphal. I mean it as I never meant anything in my life. Pick up the ring and get out!"

Silently he bent and picked up the tiny circle, closed his fingers around it, and backed from the room. Going down the steps, he thought bitterly of what he had said about death being the worst hurt. He knew now he had been wrong. He rode away from the house without once looking back. Campbell's appraisal came to him then, damningly. Idealist, the owner had called him, and now he harbored the idealist's reward inside him. The knowledge that he was right was bitter solace. He cursed and shut his eyes.

It was afternoon when he rode into Rio Blanco, past the office of the Sentinel, and the grubby bank building. There were a dozen idlers on the sidewalk, men of leisure who did not have the price of a drink. One or two of them nodded in his direction, but he could feel the barrier between them. It was shaping up, and Lin had sense enough to know that even old friends could do no more for him than keep neutral.

He climbed down in front of the Nugget, remembering the days when the saloon had rung with the shrill voices of women entertainers. It was quiet now. The lethargic piano player got up, reached for his beer that was standing on the piano top and shuffled into a corner. It's as if I had the plague, Lin thought as he went to the bar. Fear and hate could be a disease too.

"Whisky, Jeff," he said to the bartender. "Leave the bottle."

"Sure, Westphal," the fat man said, his face a moon of indifference over folded chins. Diplomatically, he polished the shot glass with his cloth, slid it across to Lin, and uncorked the bottle.

Lin poured the glass full and drained it. He refilled it and then stood sizing up the men at the bar, watching their reflections in the mirror. Most of them he knew, and he spoke to them all in general while his fingers twisted the liquor on the polished bartop.

"I need two riders," he said evenly. "It's steady work, at thirty a month. Anybody looking for a job?"

He tossed off the second drink, scarcely feeling the bite of it as it went down. It was one of those days, he knew. A man could drink and feel good, or he could just start feeling meaner.

There were no answers. He watched two men sidle away from the bar and head for the door.

Shrugging, he reached for the bottle. There was no rush. There was always somebody who'd hire one, even on XT.

"Rotten whisky, Jeff," he told the bartender, wiping at his mouth with his knuckles.

"It's the same you always drink, Westphal," the man said, meeting his gaze full on. "Too bad about old man Patterson. A lot of people in town liked him."

"I liked him, too," Lin said harshly, "but that's no reason he can rustle XT cows and get away with it. He made a mistake; he got caught. I don't need a sermon, either."

"None intended," the bartender said. "I was just making talk."

He turned away and went down the bar, and Lin knew how it was to drink alone. Angrily he poured another shot. As he lifted his head to drink it, he saw Vance Brady push in through the doors.

"Well, damned if we ain't honored!" Brady grunted, a sneer coarsening his square face. "Are you celebrating, Westphal?"

"No," Lin told him, swinging around and hooking his elbows on the bar in back of him. "I'm recruiting."

"You have more guts than sense," Brady said, moving up to the bar. "Dora told me how it stood with you. Do you mind if I take care of the gal, along with the old man's cattle?" He jabbed an elbow at Ferraday and guffawed hoarsely.

LIN turned back to his drink, fighting down the rage that grew at the thought of Vance Brady and Dora. The thing was done, she had made the choice, so let her have it. Unconsciously his hand closed over the ring in his pocket. With a vicious gesture he pulled it out and tossed it at Brady.

"It's no skin off my back," he said. "If she can see anything in you, she doesn't deserve any better."

Down the bar, someone laughed. The sound of it heightened the flush on Brady's face. His brows crumpling together, he flung words out at Lin.

"I won't need a ring, smart guy. You can think of that while you're eating your heart out for her."

Despite the satisfaction saying that gave him, it was plain Lin had touched his pride. Brady would have jumped him if he dared, but he had tried it before and regretted it. Instead, he changed the subject.

"Where's Jerry Lake?"

"I haven't the slightest notion," Lin said, reaching in his pocket for money. He put the coins down on the bar and stepped away.

"Maybe you will later, eh?" Brady asked. He was laughing again, and an odd discomfort ran through Lin.

"I doubt it," he said. "Not that it's any of your business. The law will worry about it."

"You could be wrong," Brady said. "Don't let us keep you, if you have things to do. Better get yourself lined up at Emma's for tonight. I'll think about you, when I'm at Patterson's, looking after Dora." He laughed suggestively.

Lin stalked from the saloon, his face a tight mask of anger. The liquor was taking hold now, not the easy relaxing way he had hoped for, but a nervous tightness that drummed at his temples and twisted his face into a scowl. He still had to hire two men, and it didn't help to have every good man in town turn away from him as if he were suggesting murder.

In the end he had to settle for Bass Winfield, a rat-faced little drunk, and a drifter he had never seen before. Winfield's saddle was in hock at the livery stable, and Lin had to advance the money to get it out. When he had sent the two of them out of town toward the ranch, he was in an evil mood.

The right thing to do would have been to eat a decent meal at the hotel and then tackle the chore Campbell had set for him. That would have cleared some of the ringing from his ears, and rid his mouth of the furry taste. Instead, he went back to the saloon, and sat at a table in the corner to drink his supper.

"You'd better take it easy, Westphal," the bartender said, when the place had taken on, for him, a shiny haze that wasn't all smoke. "Why don't you knock off for the night?"

"I have a suggestion for you, my fat friend," Lin told him thickly.

But after the man had gone behind the bar, the warning filtered through. Nervously, Lin felt for the envelope in his pocket. The bartender was right; someone might take advantage of his condition to jump him outside. It was nine o'clock, he made out with some difficulty. He paid his bill and walked stiffly from the Nugget.

He untied his horse and pulled himself into

the saddle. The night air helped drive some of the fog from before him, and he shook his head to clear it. None of the attempts he had made to square things in his mind helped any. Campbell was right, and Lin was a fool who was just running up against a tough problem. Sure, he was right and Dora was wrong. But what consolation was there in that?

The black horse walked slowly down the street, in and out of patches of light from windows. Sounds from the Nugget faded, and there was a whisper of night wind under a black bowl full of stars. One thing at a time, he told himself. He'd see Sims, and then—

"Westphal!" He heard someone hiss his name. "It's me, Jerry!"

Lin swore softly and reined in toward the shadowed gap between storefronts. Patterson's killer was supposed to be safe in New Mexico by now. Suppose someone should find him here!

He saw suddenly that it wasn't Jerry Lake, that this man was too small. As he recognized Ferraday, and slammed a hand down for his gun, a big figure came out of the darkness against the building and caught at his leg. Lin's gun came free, but it was too late.

He toppled backward from the saddle, fighting to overcome the liquor heaviness. He hit with a jolting crash, and heard Brady snort in triumph. A heavy boot smashed against his ribs and something hit him in the face. After that it was a blind agony of raining blows until the red turned to black, and he passed out.

THE moaning he heard was his own, and he had to bite his tongue to silence it. He was lying up against the building. Slowly he realized that the sounds he heard were only in his head—that and the loud beating of his heart. With a wrenching effort, he rolled enough to get a hand on the corner of the building. Splinters cut into his fingers, but he scarcely felt them because of the other hurts.

For minutes he just sat there, unable to do more than breathe and let his eyes focus. His horse stood where he had fallen, but there was no sign of Brady and Ferraday. They had left their mark, though. With his free hand, Lin touched the bruises on his face and groaned.

Suddenly he thought of the money he was to give Sims, and he grabbed at his pocket with a violence that wrung a gasp from him. The envelope was still there, still crackling with the bills inside. His head sank to his chest with the relief. They had jumped him only for the beating. Brady was too smart to kill him outright.

Getting to his feet was bad enough, walking was exquisite agony. But he got to the horse, and then it was easier, holding to the horn. At the trough in front of the bank he fell on his knees and doused his head in the cool water. Then he managed to get back on the black and rein him around.

He was still drunk, and vaguely he knew he was going to see Sims simply because he couldn't think of what else to do. When he got that done, maybe the next move would come to him. For now, he was nearly helpless from the beating, and the numbing effects of the liquor.

Every time he tried to think, his head hurt. So he just rode. Slowly his breath eased to normal and the hurt in his chest let up. His face felt hammered out of shape, and he was aware now that he was bareheaded. He couldn't have cared less.

Sims had an old farmhouse about two miles from town. A settler had gone broke and left it. The editor had taken over for the taxes, and he and his daughter had fixed the place up creditably. Lin watched the house now, as he neared it, the shingles a silvery gray in the light from a half moon.

Do it discreetly, Campbell had said, and this should be all of that. He wasn't sure, but it must be well after ten o'clock. A faint light glowed at one back window. Lin felt again for the envelope in his pocket. It would be a relief to get rid of that. He brushed at the dust powdering the front of him, knowing he must look like a drunk who had fallen on his face. Not that it made too much difference to the task he had to do.

He got down painfully, and brushed again at his clothes, a trace of pride prompting the action. Then he moved to the porch that was just two steps above the dirt of the yard. Wiping at his face, he rapped on the door and

There was a man hanging from the scrub oak that bordered the trail.

took a deep breath. There was no answer and he knocked again, harder this time. It would be his luck that Sims was gone and he'd have it all to do over again. But what of the light at the window? He heard footsteps then, and a soft padding across the floor. He stepped back as the door opened a crack.

"Sims?" he said, not surprised that it hurt his mouth to talk. "It's Westphal. Campbell sent me."

"Go away," a voice said.

He saw the girl then, faintly, in the light of the candle she carried. Helen Sims was tall and dark. Her hair hung down below the shoulders of the wrapper she had put on over her nightclothes. The door started to close, and Lin shoved his boot forward angrily to jam it.

"Open the door," he said harshly, impatiently. It was just like a woman to be perverse.

"I've business with your father, Miss Sims."

"Please," she said, and there was urgency in her tone now in place of the brusqueness. "I don't want him to—"

With an oath, Lin shoved the door open, forcing the girl back. The wrapper parted, revealing the white of her gown, swelling at the bosom, and she colored. He took his eyes from her and shouted for Sims.

"Come on, man, I don't have all night!" he said irritably. "Sorry, miss, but I've been pushed around enough for one night."

"All right, mister, get your hands up!" The voice was thick with drink. Lin turned to see a rifle covering him from the doorway at the back of the room. "Leave my daughter alone or I'll blow your head off."

"Put that down," Lin said in disgust. "I have an envelope for you from Stanley Campbell. Will you take it so I can get the hell out of here?" He pulled the money from his pocket and held it out.

The newspaperman blinked and lowered the gun. He looked from Lin to the girl and then back at the money. Wetting his lips, he moved forward, still carrying the gun as though not sure he could believe his ears. Leaning the gun against the wall, he took the envelope and with shaking fingers tore it open. Thumbing the greenbacks, he gasped in surprise.

"He meant it, Helen!" he said. "I thought he was ribbing me, but Campbell meant what he said!"

The words slurred, and Lin twisted his mouth in disgust for the man. Sims must have been in the back bedroom, drinking and brooding over the sinking of his paper. Now he was almost fawning.

"Don't take it, Dad," the girl said, color still painting her cheeks. She held the wrapper about her tightly, and drew back as Lin let his eyes move up and down her body. "You know the strings on that money; remember the promise you made."

"I know, I know," Sims said excitedly. "But don't you understand, it's a chance to build back! We're not finished, Helen, we're not licked yet!"

"I'll be going," Lin said. "I don't think Campbell was expecting any answer."

"Wait. At least have a drink with me," Sims said.

LIN heard the girl groan and watched her turn and walk from the room, closing the door to the other bedroom behind her. Sims was gone only a few seconds. Then he was proffering a bottle with a couple of inches of liquid left in it.

"A toast," he said. "A toast to the Sentinel. Wait, I'll get glasses."

"Don't bother," Lin told him. "This'll save washing them." He tilted the bottle and let the stuff slide down. It was good whisky, and the fire of it warmed him more than all he had drunk in town.

"To the Sentinel," he said. "Though your daughter didn't seem overjoyed."

Sims finished the liquor. Fishing the roll of bills from his pocket, he smiled and riffled them again.

"She doesn't have the thirst," he said in explanation. "There's blood in her veins, not the mixture of printer's ink and alcohol that makes me tick." His face glowed with self-satisfaction and liquor, and he laid a hand on Lin's arm.

"One favor," he said, almost pathetically. "I must get a wire off if the Sentinel is to start publishing immediately. Could I borrow your mount for as long as it it takes to ride to town and back? My gratitude would be eternal, Westphal."

"Now, look," Lin said in protest.

He wanted nothing more than to get back to XT and collapse on his bunk. Then he shrugged. He was tired; it would feel good to relax for a couple of hours. Maybe his head would clear enough so that he could talk more sensibly to Campbell.

"Hell, go ahead," he said, opening the door.

"Thanks!" Sims said, almost bubbling over. "I can't sit a horse, and it would take too long to hitch up the buggy."

On the verge of saying the editor was too drunk to do it, Lin held his tongue. He wasn't in much better shape himself, and he watched silently as the man pulled into the the black's saddle and rode out of the yard. Then he went into the house and sat down onto the sofa. The girl was the farthest thing from his mind as his eyes went shut, and he might have slept until Sims returned, but for her coming out.

"Are you proud of yourself?"

He started, straightening up with an effort. Helen Sims stood over him, her face cold and pale as she looked down at him. He had seen the girl in Rio Blanco a dozen times, and had nodded to her without paying any more attention than to notice that she had the patrician look. She was like a displaced Easterner, lost in the rough Panhandle country. Now she regarded him with disgust.

"What do you mean?" he snapped. The tiredness in his bones was almost a luxury as he stretched.

"Did Campbell buy you too," she asked cuttingly, "soul and all? You know very well what I mean. What you can't do legally, you do with money."

"Shut up, Miss Sims," he said. "You bother me."

"Why you—"

Her hand let go of the wrapper and whipped out to slap him viciously across the face. It hurt, coming as it did on top of the bruises Brady and Ferraday had dealt him, and he swore involuntarily. Then he was on his feet, trapping her wrists before she could strike again. He pulled her close, liquor abetting the desire forming like white flame in his mind.

"For somebody who hits so hard, you're mighty soft," he said, revelling in her struggles to escape. "Why don't you scream? I thought all women did."

The horror of realization froze her face, but no sound came from her throat. It all came piling in on Lin then; the break with Dora, the beating; all the rottenness that was so unfair. He needed something to make up for that, to bury all the hurt and misery in him. He crushed his face down against Helen's.

She fought her lips away from his, until he caught both hands in one of his and wrenched her head back with the other. As he forced his lips against her cold ones, her mouth opened and she bit him savagely. The pain of that made him go berserk, and he caught her again by the shoulder as she tried to break loose. Her wrapper fell open, baring white flesh.

"Please!" He heard the word dimly in his ear as she struggled. "Please don't!"

Her voice was tiny and hopeless, and yet it blasted sanity back to him. It was as though he could see himself, animal-like, from a distance. He turned away awkwardly, while the girl covered herself with the wrapper again.

She was crying now, so softly he could barely hear her, and shame was a choking ugliness in him. "I'm sorry," he muttered.

Sorry! What a joke. He had sunk lower than anything he could imagine, and all he could say was that he was sorry. He turned to the girl then, his eyes hot. Her face was wet and trembling.

"I know it's no excuse," he said miserably, "but for what it's worth, I'm drunk. If he hadn't asked for the horse—"

"I know," Helen Sims said. "Don't talk about it. I'll fix some coffee."

HE SAT on the edge of the sofa, his head drooping close to his knees, and listened to her in the kitchen. The rifle still stood by the wall in the front room, and he wondered why she didn't pick it up and shoot him. The town would probably give her a medal. She had a double reason for killing him now. And yet she was fixing him coffee to sober him up!

She brought the cup in to him, and sat in a chair across the room while he drank it. Twice he started to say something, but didn't because there was nothing to say. The coffee was strong and black, and his head cleared as he drank it. When he had finished, he stood up and looked at the clock.

"Your father ought to be back in an hour," he said. "I'll wait outside."

"He won't be back tonight," Helen said evenly. "You'd better take the horse that's in the barn and go on. Dad will return your horse as soon as he can."

Lin nodded and moved to the door. He turned to look back at her, struggling for something to say. "I—thanks for the coffee," he said lamely.

"It's all right," the girl said.

The editor's horse was a boney, swaybacked mare, and there was only an old blanket to use for a saddle. Riding through the night, Lin thought bitterly that at least everything that could go wrong had already happened. When he reached the fork by the Rio Blanco, he found he was wrong. There was a man hanging from the scrub oak that bordered the trail. It was Jerry Lake, and he had been dead a long time.

For several minutes Lin couldn't move, but sat his horse staring at the shapeless thing that had been a man. He wished fervently that he could retch and rid himself of the vile twisting inside, but there was no such relief. In the end, without the strength to free Lake from the noose, he simple blasted the rope with his gun, watching with dull pity as the corpse fell and crumpled on the ground.

With an effort he hoisted the slight figure over the horse's rump, and then got back into the saddle to ride on toward XT. His mind was unable to comprehend all that had happened, much less figure ahead to what would come next. It was a nightmare.

There was a guard riding the road half a mile from the ranchhouse, and Lin swore helplessly at the challenge. Coming close, the rider saw his burden, and his face went pale in the faint light.

"Good Lord!" he said, and then his mouth moved without purpose. "Whitey's going to take this hard."

"Yeah," Lin said, spurring toward the single light up ahead. "He's not alone, either. I told him the kid was safe."

Campbell was still up, in spite of the hour, but he didn't hear Lin until he pushed open the door and walked in. Then the owner put down his pen and pushed back in his swivel chair, rubbing tiredly at the corners of his eyes with the thumb and fingers of one hand.

"You made a night of it, eh, Westphal?" he said coldly. "Did you give—" Lin's battered condition finally registered, and he swore and stood up. "Damnation! Don't tell me Sims did that?"

"I won't," Lin said. "It was Brady and Ferraday, so don't fret yourself over my bruises. Sims took your money, all right." He swayed a little with dizziness, but Campbell was smiling now and didn't seem to notice.

"Fine, fine! Thanks, Westphal; you won't regret it. How was Helen?"

Lin pressed his mouth tight shut for a few seconds, recalling what had happened. When he spoke his voice was hard and bleak. "You're still *persona non grata*. And next time do your own dirty laundry. I'm through."

"Oh, come on!" Campbell essayed a booming laugh, which was rare for him. He moved quickly to a cabinet across from the desk and swung open a door. "What you need is a drink. Hair of the dog, you know. And don't tell me you haven't had a few; I can see you have."

"A drink?" Lin repeated. "You think I need a drink?" He could cheerfully have smashed a fist against the owner's hard head.

"Right. To celebrate. With Sims in our camp, and the lesson Patterson learned the hard way, we'll have this thing licked."

He had been pouring out liquor while he talked, and now he proffered a glass to Lin with a mock bow, like a formal host.

"The hell with it!" Lin said, and knocked the glass to the floor. "Take a look outside, and see what we have to celebrate, you damned fool!"

He caught Campbell's arm and dragged him, protesting, out onto the porch, with the bottle still clutched in his hand. His string of oaths cut off clean when the owner saw Jerry Lake's body flopped over the horse like a sack of meal. He stopped to set down the bottle, then walked stiffly down the steps.

"Young Lake," he said, the words hollow and spent as he looked at the corpse. "But he was supposed to be in New Mexico."

"You were wrong," Lin said damningly. Then a thought struck him, and he reached forward and caught Campbell's coat. "Did you do this to satisfy the settlers?"

"Don't be an utter fool!" Campbell snapped, ripping himself free. "I feel rotten enough as it is. I sent the boy to die myself, but it was an accident, I swear it."

"Jerry Lake is dead," Lin said, "and I have to tell his brother." He swung around and beckoned to the rider who had come in with him.

"Jay, take the body over to the barn and get a tarp. After that, keep your mouth shut until I tell you. I want to see Whitey first, understand?"

"Right," the rider said. "Do you know who did it, Lin?"

"I know he's dead, and that's all. But I'm going to find out. Go on, do what I told you."

CAMPBELL put an arm on Lin's shoulder, and there was concern in his voice when he spoke. "You look like the devil, Westphal. Why don't you hit the hay

before you keel over? In the morning we'll have a parlay and figure what to do about this mess. And get it out of your head that this was premeditated on my part. Maybe I'm mean at times, but I'm not a skunk yet."

"Sorry," Lin said wearily. "I'm strung up. I'll be asleep on my feet soon, so I'd better get some rest. I'll see you as soon as I get up. Maybe by then I can think."

He left Campbell on the steps and trudged to the bunkhouse. Guiltily he looked over at Whitey Lake as he passed the bunk, relieved that the convalescing cowboy was asleep, wheezing softly under his blankets.

Lin pulled off his boots and stripped. In spite of the drumming in back of his temples, he passed out as soon as he hit the mattress, losing consciousness with a vast sense of fatigue, mental as well as physical.

Hours later, he blinked in the shaft of sunlight and threw back the blanket, afraid he had slept longer than he had planned. As he dressed, he saw Whitey thumbing restlessly through a faded magazine. Lin flung up a hand in greeting.

"How are you, feller?"

"Better'n you look, Lin," the puncher said, grinning. "Did you tangle with a wildcat, or just one of Emma's gals?"

"Is there any difference?" Lin asked, forcing a smile in return. "I have to get going, Whitey, or I'd stay and jaw a while."

Right now he wasn't up to telling the puncher about the corpse under the tarp. When he had talked with Campbell would be time enough.

Washed and shaved, with fresh clothes on, he felt more nearly human. His stomach still protested, but he got down a fair breakfast and then went into the office. Campbell was waiting, his face sober.

"Did you tell Whitey?" he asked, and it was plain he hoped Lin would nod.

"Not yet. Something came back to me I wanted to mention—not that I know what we can do about it. Brady sounded off in the Nugget yesterday, and he asked if I knew where the kid was. When I denied it, he said I would soon—or rather, he hinted I would. I think I know why. Brady, or one of them, must have intercepted Jerry on his way west. Then they left him where we'd be sure to find him. We have no proof, and you know where sentiment lies now."

"That's your law-abiding method," Campbell said bitterly. "Some things we have to do for ourselves, Westphal, and this is one."

"All right," Lin said. "Let's take one thing at a time. I figure Brady is responsible for it. In time maybe I can prove—"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

The stricken voice made them both whirl toward the door in surprise. It was Whitey Lake, his face contorted and wet with tears. He had pulled on a pair of levis, but his underwear showed over it, bulking around the bandages on his chest.

"You didn't say a word, Westphal," he said accusingly. "The kid didn't have a square shake at all. I'll kill the bastards who did it."

"Easy, Whitey," Lin said, moving to support the reeling puncher. "I was going to tell you, feller. I'm sorry, I can't tell you how sorry, about the kid. We'll see that the killers pay for it, I promise."

"Like you promised he'd be all right?" Whitey said brokenly. He looked toward Campbell and clenched a fist. "You're to blame, you stiff-backed snob! You can write out my time as of now, Campbell. I'm getting off the place because it stinks. You killed Jerry, just as if you had put the rope on him yourself!"

Two cowboys came up the steps, their faces tight with helpless rage, and Lin helped Whitey out onto the porch and let them take him between them.

"I'm sorry, Lin," Jay Morrow said guiltily. "I didn't think Whitey could hear us talking about it."

"It's all right," Lin said. "He had to find out sooner or later. I should have had the guts to do it first thing, but I didn't."

"We'll shoot the skunks in the belly, Whitey," the other puncher said hotly, as though the thought of revenge would salve the hurt in the wounded cowboy.

Whitey choked out, "From here in, I take care of things myself. You hear that, Campbell? I'm the law now."

"Did you ever hate yourself, Campbell?" Lin asked as they went back into the office.

It had been rough, but in a way he was

glad it happened the way it did. It was done now, fast and clean, like a knife.

"Hate myself?" Campbell repeated. "Not to the point of melodrama, Westphal. The XT is still in business and, in case you've forgotten, we're shipping a bunch tomorrow. I'd send Cobbet, but he's heading east to meet a herd I bought when I was in Austin. Better take every man available, and see they're armed and awake. I'd say Brady's taken over the job you turned down."

"What do we do with Jerry Lake?" Lin asked.

"What can we do? Bury him. I'll send Jay in for the sheriff. Don't worry, we'll get the word around. Sims will print it, and I'll see that my friends in the East hear what we're up against."

"Sure," Lin said. "All of which won't do any good for the dead man."

"What do you expect? You want me to pull out and let them cut this place up into sections? When that happens, I'll be in the fix young Lake is now. It's rough, and I know it. They want a fight, and they'll get it. But we can't just lay down and quit because a couple of men have been killed!"

"No," Lin said. He shrugged, knowing Campbell was right. There was work to do, and he'd better get at it. Maybe Brady would make a move again, and they could nail him in the act. Lin went to the door and looked back at the owner. "See that Whitey doesn't try to leave," he said. "Maybe the Doc can keep him quiet for a few days till he comes to his senses."

"Don't worry," Campbell said. "I'll watch him.

WITH eight men, Lin drove two hundred head of three-year-olds to the railroad. Any other time he'd have felt like a fool, with a force that big, but Campbell was right. There was no point in courting trouble, and strength might make Brady think twice. The words of the former XT hand came back to Lin. He had promised to break the ranch. He had boasted about Dora, too.

The thought of the girl was a dull tearing in his chest. The days since she had driven him from the Patterson place seemed years, and it was hard to remember that they had planned to marry soon. He had been a fool to dream; he wouldn't make that mistake again.

No trouble materialized. A rider was thrown against the pens at the shipping point and broke a wrist. Outside of that, the drive was childishly simple. Lin accepted the draft from the buyer and watched the cows penned. Riding back to the ranch, he felt sheepish, in spite of the knowledge that the precautions had been well-taken.

At the XT, things were under control. Jerry Lake's body had been taken to town for shipping back to his home in the East. With sedatives, the doctor had managed to keep Whitey in his bunk so that the hole in his chest could heal. And Campbell was gleeful about the first edition of the Sentinel that came out backed with his money.

"The power of the press!" he said expansively. "It's a wonderful invention, son."

"As long as it's printing your side," Lin said dryly. "We're not out of the woods by a hell of a lot."

"You worry too much," Campbell told him. "I'll pour you a drink if you won't knock it out of my hand again. Relax, Westphal. That bunch is bluffing. What can they do now?"

He found out the next afternoon. Lin had been keeping an eye on Whitey Lake, walking the puncher about the ranchyard to get air. He had just taken him back to his bunk when the two men rode up outside. The sight of the star flashing on the sheriff's vest made him think they might have news of Jerry Lake's murder, and he ran over.

"I have a warrant," the law man said. "I reckon it's a mistake, Lin, but I have to take you and Campbell in." He looked embarrassed as he handed down the paper.

"Take us in? What for?" Lin protested. The warrant was in order, and he shook his head in confusion.

"Cattle theft," the sheriff said. "Akers and Fremont claim you sold half a dozen head of their stuff yesterday. I have no choice."

"That's a damned lie, and you know it! When we pick up other brands we pay for them, just like anybody else. Unbranded stock on our range is ours; that's accepted practice."

"But these were branded, Lin," the sheriff said apologetically. They were branded be-

tween the toes, all six of 'em. Brady says he knows there's been stealing going on for a long time, and now he has proof. As I said, you can probably clear it up, but I have to take you in anyway."

"This is an outrage," Campbell said, coming down the steps. "What is he talking about, Westphal?"

"Brady's smarter than we figured, I guess," Lin said. "I've heard of the stunt. Your lawyer can earn his money for a change."

"I'll file a counter-suit!" Campbell roared. "They'll laugh out of the other side of their mouths when I'm done. Look, sheriff. You just put that paper in your pocket. We'll come into court tomorrow, after I've had a chance to confer with my attorney."

"Well, I don't know, Mr. Campbell. I was supposed to bring you in."

"Hell, man, you know I won't risk contempt proceedings for something like this! Use your head, and you'll be sheriff a long time. You have my word, and I'll vouch for Westphal. We'll be in court by four tomorrow."

The lawman rolled his eyes toward his skinny deputy and then looked from side to side. Finally he spat deliberately and slid the warrant into his pocket. Bunching the reins, he wheeled his horse and nodded to the deputy.

"Reckon that'll do," he said. "It's kind of hard for you to run right in to town. And this is just peanuts anyway. Evening, Lin, Mr. Campbell."

"Damnation!" Campbell said. "A man can take just so much."

"Looks as if we have to take a little more," Lin said. "But Brady didn't look that bright."

What kind of justice do you think a jury would give us in Rio Blanco?" Campbell railed. "They'll tie it up with Patterson now, and claim we really did have his cows that time!"

"Sure," Lin said. "But a fair judge could see through it. You can see we get that much help, with the influence you have."

"Judge, hell! I'll demand a change of venue," Campbell said. "It's our only chance, Westphal. Look, I'm going to ask one more favor of you."

"You're not running out and leaving me with the sack," Lin said. "If you're not there at four tomorrow, we're finished, Campbell, and I mean it. You can't buy off forever. I've told you before, we have to face this thing. Let's get it done now."

"But if I can just get to the circuit judge at Amarillo—"

"Hell no," Lin said. "Your two hundred dollars a month gets you a foreman. That's all. You bought a paper, and I think you paid off the law, or part of it. I told you you can't buy me. We see the judge together tomorrow, understand?"

Campbell shrugged and sank into a chair. "All right. I had to try, though. Look, I have letters to get off. Will you tell Wong to bring in a tray?"

"Right," Lin said, and left the office.

He had won his point, and he felt better for that. In the back of his mind was the idea that Brady and the others figured on XT blowing up at the warrant and starting a feud that could only end in disaster for the ranch. This way, they might cross the small cattlemen up and salvage something from the mess. When his contract was up, he would be done. But until then he was bound by duty to stick it out.

SUPPER was a strain. Whitey ate like a man in a trance, and his silence was contagious. Few of the hands used the coffee pot when they were done. Lin followed Whitey onto the porch to roll a smoke and watch the brooding puncher stare out into the night.

"You all right, Whitey?" he asked softly.

"Yeah," Whitey said, flinging a butt into the yard. "I'm fine. Soon as I can ride I'm clearing out of this muck hole."

"I'll hate to lose you," Lin said, and watched him walk toward the bunkhouse.

With Campbell and Lin in town, there was no telling what Whitey might do. Lin walked to the office, meaning to discuss it with the owner. The tray of food the Chinaman had brought in was finished, except for half a cup of cold coffee floating with cigar ash. Campbell was gone. With a tight feeling, Lin walked to Campbell's room and rapped.

"Campbell? Open up."

When there was no answer, Lin kicked the door wide and struck a match. A bureau drawer still stood open, and Campbell's work-

ing clothes were thrown across the bed. Lin swore aloud, remembering the eastbound that went through Rio Blanco. He couldn't catch the boss now. Anger seethed through him.

Slamming out the door, he crossed the yard. He should have read Campbell better; the man had given in too easily. Now he was plannning a desperate trip to Amarillo in the hope of moving the trial in spite of Lin's ultimatum.

On the verge of saddling his horse and trying to cut him off anyway, Lin heard the thud of approaching hoofbeats and peered into the dark. Had he figured wrong? Was it Campbell coming back?

"Hello! I'm looking for Mr. Westphal."

An adolescent voice reached him, and a moment later he was looking up at a freckle-faced boy in overalls astride the bare back of a mule.

"You found him," he said. "What the devil are you doing out here? We don't hire your size, kid."

"I'm not looking for a job, mister," the boy said, rubbing a sleeve across his nose. "I have a letter for you, that's all."

He took off his shapeless hat, removed a wadded envelope from the crown, and handed it down to him.

"A letter?" Lin said in surprise, looking at the neatly written address. It was a woman's writing, and he ripped it open with a quick intake of breath. "Who gave—" He saw the signature then, and bit off his words. It was signed "Dora."

"A lady give it to me," the boy said, snuffling loudly. "Mister, she paid me, but it's a mighty long ride."

"Here," Lin said gruffly, pressing a dollar into the boy's hand. "Shag it back to town, kid. And stay on the main trail."

"Don't worry, mister. I know the way. Thanks. Geedap, mule!"

As he rode out, Lin took the steps two at a time, and slammed into the office to read the letter. He was a fool again, he knew. It was all finished with Dora, and yet—

The note was short, and yet there was urgency in it.

"Dear Lin:

I must see you at once. In spite of what has happened, will you come to the line shack on Horn Mountain right away? If I don't see you, I'm afraid there won't be another time, and so this will be good-bye. Please, Lin, if my love ever meant anything, come.

Dora"

The picture of the blonde girl was bright in his mind as he readied a mount, and the longing was still in him. A man needed a woman, no matter what.

Swinging up into the saddle, he rode over to the bunkhouse and yelled for Cobbet, then remembered the man was on the trail. Another cowboy poked his head out the door and looked up at him.

Lin said, "I have to—I have a lead on the kid's murderer. In case I'm not back, tell Cobbet and he can run the show for a little while."

"All right," the puncher said, his voice dubious. "But now we can't find Whitey."

"You'd better!" Lin snapped furiously. "They'll cut the poor fool down as soon as he makes a move. Find him!"

He spurred off then, wondering how much more could go sour. Whitey was still weak from his own wound, and probably half crazy with thinking of Jerry and what the town bunch had done to the kid. Guilt rode with Lin as he swung west on the road. But there was the chance Dora's message might have something to do with Brady.

It must have been near midnight when he came up out of the valley and started the long slant up Horn. The shack Dora had mentioned was little used. It had once served crews riding herd in high grass country. Miles from anywhere, it would be a perfect ambush, and he considered the possibility that it could be a trap. Brady could have forced the girl to write the words. But hope lingered in him as he made out the dim shape of the rock-and-timber structure.

He stopped well short of the shack, dismounted, and tied the horse. The animal nickered, lifting his nose high to the night breeze, and an answering sound came from up the slope. There was at least one horse here already. He would be a fool to walk in blind. Checking his gun, Lin started in a looping circle that brought him to the shack from the far side. Stopping, he listened carefully, and heard nothing but the wind and the sound of a horse cropping the graze.

GUN in hand, he moved in, not even breathing. Almost at the shack, he caught the glow of a single candle, and heard a sudden soft sigh. There was a woman inside. Suddenly caution left him as he covered the last few yards. With the gun still gripped tight, he flung his arms around the girl, crushing her to him with a hungriness he could not deny.

"Dora," he muttered into her hair in the darkness. "I've prayed for this, darling."

Suddenly he released the girl with an oath, shoving her back toward the light of the candle. She wore a white blouse and a dark skirt; her head was bare and her face shadowed. But he swore again, as he recognized Helen Sims. It *had* been a trick. He leveled the gun with icy hatred.

"You miserable cheat," he said. "I ought to kill you for that."

She retreated to the table holding the candle, and stood there with her hands gripping the edge of it. Her breath came rapidly, lifting the bosom of the snowy-white blouse in trembling agitation. But she said nothing. The faint, sharp scent of perfume came across the room to Lin as his reason returned.

"Who sent you here? he asked. "At least tell me that much!" He cocked his head as he whispered, listening for the first sound of the ambush.

Helen shook her head, her eyes wide now as he started for her. With his left hand he caught her arm, pulling her up close as he thumbed back the hammer of his gun. Her silence infuriated him, and he clamped his fingers in the softness of her arm.

"No one," she said between clenched teeth. "I wrote the note because it was the only way I knew to get you here. There's no one else with me."

"You lie!" he snapped. Letting go of her, he slapped her hard on the cheek. "Talk, and do it fast. I'd hate to kill a woman, even your kind."

"I swear it," she whispered, falling back against the table. Even in the dim light, he could see the spreading blotch of angry color from the blow. "I did it to make you a bargain."

"A *what?*" Lin said, his voice rising.

"A bargain. Do what you can to make Campbell leave Dad alone before it's too late. I know Campbell rates you high; you could—"

"You overrate me, Miss Sims," Lin said, laughing harshly. "I'm only an overpaid cowhand. You have the wrong man. What's your end of the deal, now?" He eyed her curiously.

"The night you brought the money," Helen said, her voice barely audible, "you seemed to want me then. That's my bargain."

Her head drooped, and dark hair cascaded down around her shoulders, as though she had loosened it purposely. For long seconds, Lin stood watching the girl, seeing the trembling of her body, and hearing her soft, ashamed crying.

Briefly pity touched him, but he drove it out with the thought of the time he had wasted, and the risk he had taken. There was bitter disappointment that it wasn't Dora who had sent for him, though he had been a fool to hope it could be she.

"Sister," he said roughly, "you overrate yourself too. Even if I could swing Campbell your way, do you think I buy that cheap? There are girls at Emma's who make you look as ugly as sin!" That was a lie, but he wanted to hurt the way he had been hurt.

"I'm sick and tired of people trying to buy me," he went on, seeing hope die in her face. "I was drunk the other night, but I'm not now. And I'm not in the market for women. Take your cheap scheme somewhere else. I remember that Campbell told he he was hot for you."

He shoved the gun into its holster and moved to the door of the shack. The girl moved from the table, took one halting step, and raised a hand toward him.

"Lin," she said in a hopeless voice, "listen to me."

"Go to hell," he said. "And don't bother me again, ever."

He went outside then, feeling his way across the rough ground to where he had tied the horse. Without looking back, he rode down Horn, ripping the note from his pocket and shredding it to the wind. Sore with disappointment, he forced his mind on what he had to do next.

Whitey would doubtless head for Rio Blanco, bent on finding his brother's killer. He had heard Lin and Campbell talking of

Brady's knowing taunt; he'd be after the ex-ranchhand. And in his condition he was in no shape to tangle with the big man. Everything had gone to hell in the past few days, and Lin wondered as he rode why he didn't head west and leave all the rottenness behind him. Instead, he picked up the Rio Blanco road and swung toward the town.

IT WAS just daybreak when he crossed the bridge and rode down the main street. With luck, Brady might be out at the Patterson place, and the sheriff could have picked Whitey up to keep him out of trouble.

Slowing his horse, he eyed the sidewalk closely. Down the block, the door of the hotel banged shut and two men headed across the street toward the livery stable. It was not Brady, or Whitey either. Lin let out a sigh and angled for the jail, thinking to talk to the lawman. Before he reached it the sheriff was on the sidewalk in front, his rifle aimed at Lin.

"Just get down real easy," the man with the star said. "Better drop the belt first, Lin. The town's nice and quiet, and maybe we can keep it that way."

"What the hell?" Lin said in surprise. "You said you wouldn't take me in until four o'clock." Had Campbell tipped his hand, so that they were taking no chances on Lin's following suit?

"I said get down, and I mean it. I can shoot you for resisting arrest, and make it a lot easier on myself. Drop the gunbelt. You must be a fool, riding right into town like this!"

"What should I do, come sneaking down the alley? I have to locate Whitey Lake before something happens to him.

"It won't work, Lin. Ferraday's identified you. I'm going to pull this trigger if you don't do what I've been telling you to."

Lin got down, his mind threshing with what the sheriff had said. What had Ferraday, the hanger-on, to do with him? With his gun in the dirt at the horse's feet, he lifted his hands and moved away.

"You could have cleared out," the sheriff said, shaking his head. "I had no use for Brady, and I doubt that you'd have been followed far. You made a big mistake."

"Will you talk sense for one minute?" Lin said angrily. "I haven't seen Vance Brady since he and Ferraday worked me over a couple of nights back."

The sheriff said, "Ferraday told us that. He says you killed Brady on account of it. Ferraday's over at the Doc's now, half dead. Get inside, Lin, or I'll have a mob to tussle with before I've had my breakfast."

It had been a long time since fear had knotted Lin's guts, but they knotted now. Walking ahead of the long barrel, he went into the open cell; then turned to hold to the bars and stare at the lawman's face in disbelief.

"When did it happen?" he asked, his throat dry and cold.

"Last night," the sheriff said, turning the key. "Around midnight, on the edge of town. We found Brady already dead, and Ferraday still in the saddle, pumping blood like a stuck hog. There was an XT business card in the road near Brady. Nobody besides you or Campbell would be apt to have them, and I hear he's skipped out."

"I didn't kill Brady, and you know it. I couldn't have, because—"

He trailed off, realizing he had no proof outside of Helen Sims, and that was worse than nothing. If he opened his mouth, she was sure to contradict him and make it worse.

"I only know one thing, Lin. You're accused of murder, which makes the rustling charge kind of go by the boards. I'm going over to the hotel now to get some breakfast. The town's already rankling over Akers's and Fremont's beef you sold that Eastern buyer. When *this* gets around—" He shrugged and made a long face. "I'll see you get fed shortly, and then I'll contact Campbell's lawyer. You're going to need him."

"Find Whitey Lake!" Lin shouted, pulling himself tight up against the bars. "I swear I didn't shoot Brady!"

It was no use. The sheriff was crossing the street, deaf to the plea. Lin was in it now, for sure. The Sims girl had ruined him. If he'd stayed at the ranch last night, he'd have had proof he couldn't have shot Brady and Ferraday. But now, Jay would have to admit that Lin had left XT after talking about a lead on the killer. And the law wouldn't buy the story of Whitey's doing the job on Brady unless they could find him. Grimly Lin strode

to the cot that stood beneath the barred window, and sank onto the dirty mattress.

The sheriff brought back a tray of eggs floating in bacon grease, and some soggy toast. Lin put it on the floor and nursed the coffee. After that he rolled a smoke and lay back to stare at the ceiling. He thought in circles until his brain was ragged with fatigue.

"I'd let you read the paper," the sheriff said apologetically, as he reached for the tray, "only Sims didn't get one out last night. Campbell was in the paper office just before he caught that train, I found out. Then Sims went to the Nugget and got sky high."

"Is that lawyer coming?" Lin said.

"He said he would. If he isn't here in fifteen minutes, I'll send the swamper for him." There was concern in his voice. He tugged out an oversized watch and scowled at it.

STANDING on the cot, Lin could see down the street through the high window. So far there was no indication of trouble, but he could feel the tightness grow inside his chest. The coffee hadn't helped, and his stomach felt curdled. Across the street, a man in black broadcloth came out of a doorway and angled for the jail. With a sigh, Lin made out Harbin, the attorney Campbell retained. It was about time.

"It looks bad, Westphal," Harbin said, propping a shoe on the cot frame. "Did you shoot them?"

"No, I didn't! Do you think I'm crazy, Harbin? The sheriff says he's expecting trouble. What do you think?"

"I think I'd better get you out of here before there is a ruckus," the lawyer said. "The Nugget was lousy with talk against XT last night, and Akers and Fremont must be planning a showdown. Every no-good in town is talking like a hero. I won't fool you any, Westphal. We're in a spot."

"We?" Lin laughed harshly. "Now *you* sound like a hero. I'll tell you one thing—if I get hold of Campbell, I'll break that stiff neck of his. I warned him he couldn't keep on buying his way out of trouble."

"I gave up trying to reason with him, myself," Harbin said. "He's in a corner, and he's like a crazy man. If he doesn't get the change of venue, I bet he'll skip out for a while—or hire an army in Amarillo and come back to wipe Rio Blanco off the face of Texas." He moved to the locked door and called to the sheriff.

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to insist you move my client to a safer place, say Maysville, at least," Harbin said.

"You know I have no authority to do that," the lawman said unhappily. "When the judge gets back—"

"Hell, man, use your head! You're going to have a mob to cope with shortly, and you know it. I'll get a rig from the livery stable and bring it around back. You have deputies to take over until you return."

The sheriff pulled on his mustache, looking from Lin to the lawyer and back.

"Give me a break," Lin said desperately. "You think I'd stroll in here like I did if I'd plugged them?"

"All right, all right," the sheriff said finally. He pulled out the watch again and swore. "I was hoping the judge'd be back. I don't want any more trouble than I can help. Joe, come here."

He beckoned to the deputy who was leaning in the door of the jail. After he had let Harbin out, he talked in a low voice, explaining things to the deputy.

Lin rolled another smoke and stood with it between his stiff lips, watching the sheriff scrawl something on a sheet of paper at his desk. He felt better now, and the prickling at the back of his neck eased off. The Rio Blanco bunch would scarcely make trouble in the town forty miles downriver, and meantime Whitey Lake ought to show up. Where the shot-up puncher could have holed up was beyond Lin.

He climbed on the cot when he thought Harbin had had time to get the rented rig. Watching the lawyer drive the team out of the stable, he sucked in a last draft of smoke gratefuly and then flipped the butt into the alley. Then the crack of a gun down the block jolted him, and he strained to see past the corner of the building across the narrow alley. Another racket of noise cut the morning silence, and he could see the riders coming down the street.

"Hell!" he said between clenched teeth, and

dropped to the floor. "Let's get out of this place," he yelled to the sheriff, who had moved to the front door.

Watching, he saw the lawman gesture someone away, and reasoned it must be Harbin in the getaway rig. There was sense to the decision, of course, with the mob practically on them. But it hurt Lin to realize that his last hope was gone.

The two deputies were easing rifles from the cabinet in back of the desk, and the sheriff moved to unlock two cells adjacent to Lin's. One of the town's confirmed drunks blinked and shook his head as the sheriff urged him and the other jailbird out into the street. There was no point in getting them shot, Lin thought bitterly.

"You might as well send Westphal out too," a voice boomed from the street. "We know he's in there, Sheriff!"

"I'm going to unlock the cell, Lin," the lawman said. "If there's a chance to break for the alley, take it. Why the hell did you have to show up?"

There was something close to anguish in the old man's eyes as he walked to the door, hauling out his handguns as he came. The deputies had moved to the windows on either side.

"Simmer down, Fremont," the sheriff yelled. "If you have the idea you're making this into a range war, you have another think coming. Now just go on home, the lot of you."

THERE was an angry burst of talk, and two shots blasted through the noise. Then Lin froze at the sound of Dora Patterson's voice.

"XT started the war!" she cried shrilly. "They killed my father, and we aim to drive them out of the country, after we get through with Westphal."

"Somebody killed Jerry Lake, too, ma'am," the sheriff said, keeping his voice even. "The court's going to decide if Westphal is guilty, not you."

"Court, hell!" somebody bawled. "Ferraday just died, and he said the killer's name with his last breath. A man doesn't lie on his deathbed! Give us that rotten skunk who's lorded it over us!"

"Don't all of you be fools!" another voice shouted, and Lin recognized it as Harbin's.

He had to give the man credit, facing the mob that way. But it was a futile try, and they drowned him out.

"Come on, give Westphal up! We'll drill you too, if you rile us too much. Shove him out here."

"He stays inside," the sheriff retorted. "And I've wired for troops from Davis."

"Like hell!" You're lying. Campbell bought you a long time ago!"

There was another shot, and Lin watched the sheriff stagger against the jamb, one arm dropping helplessly. Cursing softly, Lin came out of the cell. There was no percentage in playing cat and mouse, and he wanted this over with. In spite of the protests of the deputies, he moved to the door and steadied the sheriff.

"All right, you yellow bastards, shoot me and get it over with!"

He faced the hatred of the mob, and felt it sear him. Dora sat a brown horse alongside Fremont and Akers, her face as twisted and vengeful as any.

"We don't shoot the likes of you, Westphal," Akers told him, "You should have kept on hiring your murders done. We have you where we want you now. There are nearly forty of us in this party, and they won't prosecute a whole town for a little lynching bee. I figure we might even get medals!"

"I'm wasting my breath, and I know it," Lin said. "I killed nobody, but I can't prove it—not that you'd listen to proof. So let's go."

He pulled free of the sheriff and walked out into the street. The riders in front edged aside to make room, and a hush fell over the crowd, as if uncertainty had gripped them. And in that sudden quiet a woman's voice rang out sharply, commandingly.

"Lin Westphal didn't murder Brady. I can prove that!"

Looking over his shoulder, Lin saw the figure of Helen Sims above the knot of lynchers. She stood erect in a buggy, holding to the reins as she urged the animal into the press of riders on the street. An outbreak of taunts met her cry, as the mob howled ridicule.

"She'd lie, just like her old man!" someone hooted. "They both sold out to Campbell."

"Run her out of town!"

"Anybody for Westphalt is against us!"

"It's the truth!" Helen shouted. "Westphal was with me at midnight last night, in the line shack on Horn Mountain!"

The words stunned Lin, and he was aware of the shocked hush that fell on the mob. By now the sheriff had recovered enough to move alongside and try to pull Lin back toward the jail, in spite of the blood drenching his sleeve.

"Let me through!" the girl shouted angrily. She plucked the whip from its socket and swung it viciously. A path opened and she drove in front of the jail, her face strained with emotion.

Lin saw then that her eyes were reddened as from crying, and sudden admiration for her coursed through him.

"She lies!" Dora Patterson raged. "She'd do anything for money, and XT paid her drunken father plenty!"

"My father—" Helen said, and broke off momentarily, biting her lip as though to hold back tears. "My father shot himself this morning. He's dead!" Her eyes singled out Dora and held her for long seconds before she went on. "I swear Westphal was with me last night. I tried to get him to leave my father alone, because I knew it was killing Dad. Westphal scorned me. I hate him, but that doesn't change the truth."

"Helen, I'm sorry." Lin moved impulsively toward the buggy, a blind sympathy making him reach out to her as he understood the reason for her tears.

"Get back there, you skunk!"

With the words came the heavy blow of a boot striking his shoulder, and Lin spun around and fell into the dirt.

For a second he lay on his back, staring up at the sky before he could clear his head. And there, silhouetted against the sun as he perched on the roof of the jail, was Whitey Lake!

The cowboy's bearded face was twisted insanely, and he held a rifle trained on Helen Sims! No wonder they hadn't found Whitey. Half crazed, he had hidden out where no one would think to look, for what purpose Lin couldn't fathom.

And now Whitey was going to kill the girl who was destroying his alibi.

WITH a warning shout, Lin sprang up, one hand pointing to the roof. As he pulled himself up into the buggy, a shot blasted through the babble of argument in the mob, and searing pain stabbed his back. He fell against Helen Sims, and would have pitched out the other side but for her supporting arms. Two more shots echoed the first, and he sucked in his breath, sure he was hit again.

There was a thin scream from the roof, and then the sound of a body hitting the board sidewalk. Lin turned his head, despite the pain, and saw the crumpled figure of Whitey in the doorway of the jail. He had carried the rifle with him, and now its barrel pierced through the planking. Helen gasped and clung tight to Lin. After that, things blurred until Lin was lying on his stomach on a cot in the doctor's office.

Vaguely he realized that Harbin was talking to him, and he turned his head to see the lawyer. Beyond him, the sheriff sat in a straight chair, his arm in a sling and a relieved look on his face.

"You had some good luck, for a change," Harbin said, shaking his head in disbelief. "If the Sims girl hadn't come along—"

"They left?" Lin asked, and gritted his teeth. He had forgotten he'd been shot, but it came back now with a vengeance.

"Akers and Fremont saw the light, and lit for home. I thought Dora Patterson was going to shoot you and the Sims girl on the spot, but somebody caught her bridle and dragged her off. You're lucky, Westphal, damned lucky."

"That's right," the sheriff said. "Now all you have to worry about is cattle theft."

"You're both wrong," another voice cut in, and Lin recognized it as the doctor's. "Lin, you'd better take a good belt of this liquor, and hang onto something tight. I've got to try to get that rifle slug out of you. Ready?"

Five minutes later, with men on his arms and legs, Lin lost all consciousness as he clamped his jaws and tried to hold back a scream. And Harbin had said he was lucky.

He recovered in a cell. Not that it made any difference where he put in his time. It gave him leisure to think, without being disturbed, once he got used to the singing and

moaning of drunks sleeping it off. And there was more than just that, too.

Somehow it purged him of some of the rottenness. While Harbin chafed against "injustice," Lin told him to take it easy. He had a jail term coming, for the part he'd played in XT highhandedness. But by the second week it was lonesome. Cobbet came in from the ranch, but that was as much business as anything. The sheriff played cribbage with him when he had time, and finally Campbell showed up.

Listening to the owner's jubilance, Lin kept silent. He wasn't sure in his mind yet about everything. And he wanted to be positive before he said his piece. Always, in the back of his mind, was the hope he'd have another visitor, but she didn't come. He was too proud to ask Harbin or the sheriff about it, either.

About the time his back stopped hurting, Campbell came in from seeing Judge Rouse. Lin know from his smile that it was settled, but he waited, sober-faced, for Campbell to talk.

"You're a free man, Westphal," he said. "I appreciate what you've done, too, and don't think I don't."

"You ought to," Lin said dryly. "It must be nice to have someone else serve time for you."

"Now don't get huffy. It's done, and it had to be. With Brady out of the picture, and all that cleared up, Akers and Fremont settled out of court and I got the charge quashed. You'd have been in bed somewhere else, that's all. A bed's a bed, eh?"

"You're doing the talking, Campbell. I won't argue the point."

"That's the way. In the long run, we come out ahead on this deal. Some of the politicians back at the capitol see now that I wasn't crying wolf. I think they'll ease up on their demands to split the big ranches."

"Have you been to see Sims's daughter?"

"Helen? Why no. I told you she has no use for me. Unfortunate that fool Sims had to blow his head off, but— Don't worry, Westphal, there'll be other papers. Harbin's dickering with the girl now for the press and other equipment. What I'm interested in mainly is your coming back to the ranch."

"My contract ran out two days ago, Campbell. Or had you forgotten?" Lin got out the makings and built a smoke, awkwardly favoring muscles that still pulled a little.

"Hell, no, I didn't forget! I have another one here for you to sign, son. You said once you didn't want to work for wages, and this ought to take care of that." He pulled an envelope from his pocket eagerly and handed it to Lin. "This gives you a piece of the ranch," he said expansively, "in addition to a raise in salary. I'm a fair man, Westphal. I'll make it up to you for the way you backed my hand."

"No thanks," Lin said evenly. He didn't have to think any more; he knew how he stood with the ranch owner. "I told you I'd work out my contract. Well, I did."

"Read it, son! I said there's a piece of XT for you. I meant it." A trace of anger edged the bluster of Campbell's voice. "You rode out a rough storm, and I'm going to see you get paid."

"That's all you know, isn't it?" Lin said without sarcasm. "You called me a fool once, and maybe you're right. But at least I'll sleep nights. And when I shave I won't hate the face I'm staring at."

"You damned idiot! What did it ever get you, besides half killed? Face it, the world doesn't run the way you think it ought to. Pull out on me and you'll never make a dime. You're no kid, Westphal, and this is a chance of a lifetime. What will you do?" Campbell stood up, his face tight with fury.

"I don't know," Lin said honestly. "First I'm getting out of this jail, since you say I'm free. After that—" He shrugged. "You say XT has smooth sailing now, Campbell, but something would come up. My price has risen. I'll shake hands, or not; suit yourself."

GRUDGINGLY, Campbell extended his hand. They shook briefly, and then Campbell dropped Lin's hand and stood moving his head from side to side. "You righteous fool," he said. "I pity you." And then he left, shoving the envelope with the contract in it roughly into his pocket and stamping out of the jail.

"Is my horse still over at the livery?" Lin

asked the sheriff as the lawman gave him his valuables.

"Yeah," the sheriff said, "probably foundering on grain. Are you really pulling stakes, Lin?"

"There's nothing I want around here any more," Lin said, belting on his gun. "And there's a lot I don't want to be reminded of."

"Good luck to you, then." The sheriff's mustaches bobbed with his nod. "You get old and you get gutless," he said apologetically, and put out a boney hand.

"Take it easy," Lin said, and went out.

He felt an odd change as he stepped into the sunlight. Actually breaking away was different from thinking and talking about it. He had ridden for XT for five years; it was hard to start fresh now. What will you do? Campbell had said, and the question brought a chilling emptiness to Lin.

He stepped off the planks, returning with a wave the curt nod of a rider going by. The stable was across the street, halfway down the block, and he hit the far sidewalk in front of the Sentinel office. Something pulled him up, and he turned to look through the dusty windows. Helen Sims sat at the rolltop desk, dressed as for traveling. Their eyes locked.

Wanting to go by and shut out the sight of her, he still remained rooted to the spot. He felt drained enough, without shouldering her suffering too, and her loss was partly his fault. Then, still knowing he ought to keep going to the stable, he moved toward the door, reaching for the tarnished knob.

She stood up as he came in, tall and straight, her face pale under her dark hair. Lin pushed the door to behind him and, still not sure why, walked toward the desk. What could he do but open half-healed wounds? She had said she hated him, and she had the right, in spades. But when a man is a fool, there is no helping him.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice echoing in the musty room. "If there were anything I could do—"

"I'm leaving Rio Blanco," Helen said, shaking her head slightly. "I can't stay here. Harbin will buy the press, and the money I get for that will get me back to Pennsylvania."

"I'm going the other way," Lin said, wondering why he thought she cared. "New Mexico—Arizona maybe."

He stood there like an oaf, cursing himself for his stupidity. All he had to do was turn and walk away from her, and yet he stood there.

"Good-bye," he said at last, and moved toward the door.

"Lin!" Her voice pierced him, and he met her halfway, his arms holding her tight to still her sobs. "Oh, Lin, don't go. Don't leave me now!"

"Why didn't you come to see me in jail?" he whispered, when she raised her face to his. "I prayed, but you didn't come."

"I knew you must hate me," she said, "and I was so ashamed."

"Don't cry," he said gently. "Not now. It's all right, Helen." He kissed her, feeling the tender response of her lips. When she drew back she was smiling through tears.

"We'll start over," he said. She squeezed his arm then, and the emptiness inside him was gone.

THAT'S THE TICKET!

PRESENT-DAY railroads have no corner on consideration shown for their passengers. Back in the old days of railroading in Colorado, the solicitude of trainmen for their passengers was often heartwarming, particularly when one considers the conditions under which winter travel was done in the high mountain country.

At one time when a Colorado-Midland train became snowbound, the heaters in the day coach were found to be inoperative. As it was bitter cold outside, the day-coach passengers soon became uncomfortable inside their chilly car. The heaters in the sleeping car were in operation, but the conductor of that car would not allow the day-coach passengers to enter his warm domain.

Fortunately for the shivering travelers, the train conductor was a bit more considerate of their welfare. Strapping on snowshoes, he hiked back to the town of Granite, where he bought a fifteen-mile Pullman ticket for each day-coach passenger. Upon his return to the train, the nearly frozen passengers were able to pass the next four motionless days in comparative comfort.

——*Burton H. Wollenzien*

LAS CRUCES

ARCH TUTTLE USED his skill as a lawyer to make him rich . . . and if it was blood money — well, he had no faith in justice anyway

THE sounds of busy Las Cruces were a dull rumble in Arch Tuttle's office. He sorted through the papers on his large rolltop desk, occasionally shoving one into the brief case on the floor beside him. His blue eyes were intent on the business before him, and his large hands moved swiftly and surely over the desk.

This was the excitement that he couldn't live without. As he looked over the papers before him, his mind was working on his final argument before the jury, the eloquent flight of oratory that would be the final blow to the prosecution. So intent was he on what he was doing that he didn't hear the door to his office open, nor notice that the street sounds had become louder.

"Excuse me, señor."

Tuttle raised his head with a jerk, startled at the voice, and turned to look. He faced a man shorter than his own six feet. He was of Mexican extraction, swarthy, thin, with his hat in his hand. But this one was not a peon. There was something about him that belied his humble bearing. Tuttle was immediately on guard.

"What is it?"

"You are the Señor Tuttle, the famous lawyer?"

"Yes, yes. But I'm busy now. Perhaps you will come back some other time."

The Mexican eyes narrowed somewhat, but his white-toothed smile didn't leave his face. He worked at the brim of his sombrero with dark fingers. Arch noted that the hat was expensive, as were the rest of his clothes.

"I bring you business, Señor Tuttle. I have stolen horses and now the law is after me. If I turned myself in, you could make them let me go free and I would not be bothered."

Tuttle sniffed and turned back to the desk. This was another plea for help. There were dozens of them in a month's time, people who had done something and wanted to be acquitted but didn't have the money to pay for it. They never seemed to realize that Arch Tuttle's services came high, very high.

He said over his shoulder, "It would cost you two thousand dollars."

"Two thousand dollars," the Mexican said thoughtfully. He walked over near the desk. "That is much money for Raphael Mata to pay, but I will do it, Señor Tuttle."

Arch frowned and looked again at the dark man. The name, Raphael Mata, was vaguely familiar, but then so were a lot of names. He said, "Nate Grayson's trial is coming up in less than an hour. I can't be bothered now."

Mata's smile left his face for a moment but he said, "I will bring you the money and then you will listen to me, no?"

Tuttle nodded. "When I see it, I'll take your case."

Mata clamped his hat on over his straight black hair, and went to the door. There he turned and said, "You have a very easy life, Señor Tuttle. Two thousand dollars is much money to a man like me. Some time you will know what it is like, perhaps."

He went out. Tuttle looked at the closed door. He knew what poverty was like, and it had been doubly hard to take because he

LAW

By RAY ELLIS

"I didn't realize how much I love you until I almost lost you," Barbara said.

had come originally from a family of influence. As it did every time he thought about it, his anger rose as he remembered once again the sight of his father hanging from the gallows in San Antonio.

He was still looking at the door when it came open again, but this time the sight that filled his eyes was much more pleasant to look at than Raphael Mata. The memories were forgotten immediately, and his anger subsided. He got to his feet, lean and handsome in an expensive suit.

"Barbara!" he exclaimed.

She smiled at him, and gave him a light kiss when he went over to her. Then she moved away expertly, before he could draw her closer.

"Who was the man that just left here, Mr. Tuttle?" she asked, slipping white gloves off her slender hands.

"That was a prospective client, Miss White," he said, with a smile. This calling each other by formal names was a game they played often. It was about the only bit of frivolity that Barbara White allowed herself, he reflected.

"He hardly looked as if he could pay the price," she told him, and there was a trace of bittnerness in her voice. She brushed a hand through her brown hair, and an engagement ring with a large diamond reflected light from the window.

Tuttle's good humor left him. This was apparently the beginning of the same old argument between them. He watched her as she walked to the window that overlooked the street. She was slender and graceful, and he always felt that she was somehow withholding herself from him, as if she were unconsciously damming the warmth and love that he knew she possessed.

"Everybody else charges all that the traffic will bear," he said shortly. "I've won some measure of fame. Why shouldn't I collect on it?"

She turned and faced him again, and he thought that the greatest emotion he had ever seen in her was her anger in moments like this.

"It isn't just that you charge a lot of money," she told him, her voice coming quick, almost stacato. "It's the men you defend. As long as they have the money to pay, you defend them in court and get them off free, no matter what they've done."

"Every man has the right of a trial," he reminded her, at the same time wishing that he could see her face, just once, flushed as it was now because of a kiss from him.

"Yes," she said, her voice taut, "but you don't have to be the one to defend them. What about Nate Grayson? You know he's guilty and still you'll try to get him off." She came across the room and stopped a few feet from him. "He killed Jim Lauderdale at the bank. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"It was only by accident that we were walking by the river after the hold-up," he said, knowing his explanation was going to sound weak. The knowledge disturbed him, and this in turn stirred his temper. "If we hadn't heard Grayson and that other man talking about the hold-up, his case would have been no different from any other."

"But we *did* hear them talking," Barbara said, insistently. She shook her head. "Does the money mean that much to you?"

HIS temper cracked a little and his words came rapidly. "You've always had plenty," he reminded her. "You can talk about money as if it weren't important. But if you'd had to struggle as I have, you'd feel differently." His breath came fast, and his chest heaved with his breathing. "Maybe I should sell the big house and bring you to a one-room shack after we're married."

"You're exaggerating," she told him fiercely. "When you're in the courtroom you hold the law on the tip of your tongue. You'd never have to worry about starving."

Thoroughly aroused now, he said, "What do you know about it? The law is made for the strong. I found that out a long time ago. Now I'm strong and I intend to get stronger."

"You're still brooding over what happened to your father," she said, her face distraught. "That was fifteen years ago, Arch. It was right after the war, when there was no law at all in Texas."

"There was enough law to hang an innocent man," he said heavily.

Her voice was almost pleading with him now. "I know it was a terrible thing for a twelve-year-old boy to watch his father hang.

but you've got to forget it. It's done with, and brooding about it can't help any."

"And what did they do when they found the real thief?" he said, reliving it in his mind. "They put him in jail for a couple of years and then let him go free. Not one of the men who hanged my father ever told me he was sorry for what he'd done." He had been looking past her to the window but now he turned to study her face. "I'll use the law my own way, Barbara."

Her voice broke as she said, "Then I won't be a part of it."

She slipped the diamond ring from her finger and dropped it on his desk. Her eyes were brimming as she walked past him and to the door.

"Barbara!" he said sharply.

She turned, her hand on the knob. "Goodbye, Mr. Tuttle," she said softly, and then was gone.

The courtroom was packed. The old frame building creaked with the weight of many people. Arch wiped the sweat from his forehead with his handkerchief and studied the papers before him. But he wasn't seeing what he had written, because he couldn't get Barbara White out of his mind. He reached into his pocket and touched the ring.

It was almost like touching her hand and it brought a certain feeling of pain. He loved her very much. Even that coldness she seemed to hold between them as some sort of protection hadn't dampened his love for her.

Somebody bumped against him, startling him out of his thoughts. He looked up into the square-jawed face of Nate Grayson, who had just been brought in by the jailer. The outlaw grinned at Arch and sat down.

"I'm looking forward to this, Tuttle," he said in his heavy, throaty voice. His black eyes bored into Arch. "For twenty-five hundred dollars, it better be good."

Arch looked away, feeling uncomfortable. There was no anticipation within him for this court battle, and that made him uneasy. He felt as if things were just out of his reach, and that no matter how hard he tried he wasn't going to be able to grab hold.

Grayson looked about the courtroom, his manner arrogant. He had killed a man during a hold-up, but he was as unconcerned as if he were on trial for stealing five dollars.

The outlaw turned back to Tuttle and said, "That jailhouse is a joke. It doesn't make much difference whether you get me off or not, because I won't stay in there anyway."

"I'll get you off," Arch told him with a good deal more confidence than he felt.

The questions started. When Nate Grayson took the stand he lied glibly as to his whereabouts during the robbery. Arch shifted uncomfortably in his chair as the thing dragged on. Almost before he realized it, it was time for his plea. He got to his feet, the sweat popping out on his forehead.

He looked about the courtroom at the eager faces. This was the thing they had been waiting for. They wanted to be charmed by his silver-tongued oratory. Even the men of the jury leaned forward expectantly as he walked toward them. They could be his, he knew, if things were right. But things weren't right.

He caught sight of Barbara in the audience, and what little desire for victory that had been in him left. He started to speak and his voice cracked. He cleared it and began again, to the sound of muffled laughter from the audience.

As he spoke, his eyes kept going back to Barbara. Her face was white and drawn, and several times he unconsciously reached into his pocket and touched the ring. Before he was halfway through the argument he knew he had lost the jury. They settled back in their chairs, bored and disappointed. He finished with his voice barely above a whisper.

Nate Grayson was furious. His beady eyes followed Arch back to the table. When he sat down, Grayson grabbed his arm in a hard grasp. "What kind of a doublecross are you giving me, Tuttle?" he whispered. "I could have pleaded a better case than that myself." He began to twist the label of Arch's coat in his fingers. "Did somebody pay you off?"

Arch knocked his hand away and said, "It isn't over yet. Wait for the verdict."

BUT it was over and he knew it. There was no surprise on his face when the foreman of the jury announced, "We, the jury, find the defendant guilty of murder,

and sentence him to hang by the neck until dead."

A murmuring undercurrent of voices filled the courtroom at the verdict. The judge rapped for order. Then, in the silence that followed, Nate Grayson spoke, his voice hard and vindictive.

"I'll get you for this, Tuttle," he said. His voice rose. "No jail will hold me."

He jumped to his feet, dragging Tuttle up with him. He clenched a huge fist and swung at Arch's face. Tuttle moved out of the way and the knuckles of Grayson's hand raked across his ear. Then several deputies were on the prisoner, pinning his arms to his sides.

"Are you all right, Mr. Tuttle?" one of the men asked. Arch nodded, rubbing his ear.

The judge rapped furiously, and then adjourned the court as soon as he could make himself heard above the babble of voices. Tuttle began to put the papers back into his briefcase as the deputies hauled Grayson back to jail. The courtroom was nearly empty when Tuttle became conscious of the fact that somebody was standing behind him. He turned and looked into Barbara's face. She was standing just beyond the railing.

"Hello, Barbara," he said without feeling.

He was surprised to see that her eyes were wet. She said, "I'm sorry, Arch. It was my fault, wasn't it?"

He shook his head. "You can't win them all. Grayson was convicted before the trial even started."

"That's not true and you know it," she told him. "You weren't yourself up there. Everybody noticed it."

He shrugged and turned his back on her, then said over his shoulder, "What is it you want?"

She took so long in answering that he turned to see if she was still behind him. She leaned toward him over the rail and he thought that the invisible barrier of coldness she had built between them was going to crack.

But then she straightened again and said crisply, "Nothing. I want nothing from you." She turned and walked rapidly from the room.

He finished gathering his papers and left the empty courtroom, his footsteps echoing hollowly behind him. All right, so he hadn't been himself today. He wouldn't stay that way. He wondered when the Mexican, Raphael Mata, would come back with the money. That case would be a real challenge, because a horse thief was worse thought of by many people than a murderer. And the man was of Mexican descent. With Las Cruces so near to the border, the prejudice against Mexicans would be another handicap he'd have to overcome.

He dropped his briefcase off at the office and walked home. The house was a large, two-story affair that he had purchased from the estate of a retired cattleman who had died the year before. It was to have been a home for Barbara when they married. But that was all done with now.

He walked across the tree-studded lawn and up the porch. It was late afternoon and the heat of the day was abating gradually. On the porch, where there was a slight breeze, it was almost cool.

He hunched down on the porch railing, letting the breeze wash over him, thinking of Barbara. She came from a wealthy family. Her father had come to Las Cruces several years ago and had set up headquarters for his far-flung mining operations. Since he also owned several cattle ranches along the Rio Grande River, Las Cruces was a convenient place from which to work.

Arch had fallen in love with Barbara almost the instant he had first met her. And he would have loved her if her father had not had a cent. In fact, he didn't know she had money until he had seen her several times. He was positive that she loved him, but always there had been a certain something in her that had prevented her from giving herself wholly to him. It was a silent, invisible barrier, something felt rather than seen. It always made him feel that if he held her too tight she would shatter like a figure carved from ice.

He stood up and headed for the front door. He could smell the dinner cooking inside, prepared by his housekeeper, Mrs. Lundy. He couldn't quite believe that it was all over between Barbara and himself. She had become part of his life. Could she cut off her love by such a simple action as removing a ring from her finger?

He ate dinner without relishing it, which was unusual, for Mrs. Lundy was a good cook and his appetite was usually large. She noticed it, too, but she said nothing. Then, some time after dinner, she left for the night and he was alone in the large house.

He tried to read, but his mind was restless. He wandered around on the porch and then came back inside, deciding that he'd go to bed early. It was then that he heard the sound of firing from the direction of town. Going back out onto the porch, he listened, hearing faint shouts but no more shooting. Somebody celebrating, he decided.

HE WAS about to turn back to the house when he saw something move in the dark. His heart skipped a beat. Then Barbara White ran up the porch steps. "Arch," she said breathlessly, "Nate Grayson escaped from the jail."

Her face was a white oval in the darkness. He drew her inside, and her hand was clammy in his own. In the light, he saw that she was frightened.

"That's nothing to get upset about," he told her, keeping his voice calm.

"But he threatened you," she cried. "He meant it, Arch."

He led her to a chair and made her sit down. She did, and then looked up at him. He said, "If Grayson escaped he'll be too busy to bother about me. Anyway, men like him are always making threats they don't carry out."

She came to her feet again. "But he's different. He tried to get at you right in court. He meant it, Arch, I know he did."

Some of her fright caught hold of him and he fought it, telling himself that Grayson was probably many miles out of town by this time. But he kept remembering the vengeful eyes that Grayson had turned on him after the verdict.

Then the sound of more shooting carried into the room, this time from a different direction. It was closer. Barbara's face went completely white and Arch stepped forward, thinking that she might faint. But his touch seemed to revive her. She pulled away. Even at a time like this she is cold, he thought. Yet she had come to warn him, knowing that Grayson might be coming, too.

"You've got to leave this house," she said. "Come home with me. He won't know where you are."

"Listen, Barbara," he began. "I won't be run out of my own house. I have a revolver upstairs in the bedroom. I'll get that if it'll make you feel better." She nodded and he added, "You go on home. I'll get the gun and then walk you back."

"But, Arch—"

He waved a hand, cutting off her protests, and mounted the stairway to the second floor. It had been so long since he'd used the revolved that he had to hunt for it. He found it on the top shelf of his closet. Then he had to search around for cartridges, which he finally found in a box in another room. He filled the cylinder of the revolver—except for one chamber—and let the hammer down on the

RECIPE FOR ROMANCE

by S. OMAR BARKER

In married life the cowboy's wife
Don't never, never cross him—
If he, that is, just minds his biz
And sort of lets her boss him!

empty hole. Then he shoved it under his belt.

He was at the head of the stairs when he heard the front door open. "Barbara," he called.

When she didn't answer he went down the steps two at a time, his pulse beginning to pound out of all reason. He was halfway across the room before he saw Nate Grayson and his hardcase friend Red Pelsen, holding Barbara between them.

Grayson had a wicked gleam in his eyes. Jamming his revolver into Barbara's side, he said, "Drop the gun on the floor, Tuttle, or the girl gets it."

He hesitated for only a second and then did as they said.

"Now kick it over here."

Again he complied.

Grayson nodded at the lamp, and Red turned it out. Arch was as blind as the rest of them were for a moment after the light was turned out, but he knew the room and they didn't. He raced across at Red's last position and crashed into the outlaw. They went down, and Arch pounded his fist into Red's face. The man grunted in pain. Then Grayson let out a curse.

Pelser rolled over and shoved to his feet. Arch came up with him. He saw the glint of faint light on the barrel of the man's gun and grabbed for it as it roared. The bullet ripped through Arch's coat, under his arm. Then Red had the gun in his hand. Arch found the edge of the table with the lamp on it, and pounded Red's wrist down on it. With a howl, Red let go the revolver. It fell to the floor with a thud.

Arch scooped it up and said, "Don't make a move. I can see you now."

"He's got me covered, Nate," Red said, gasping for breath.

Grayson chuckled and said, "Drop it, Tuttle."

Arch turned to face the other outlaw and saw that Grayson was holding Barbara in front of him now. When Arch didn't comply immediately with his order, Grayson's voice grew savage.

"I said drop it. I'll kill you if I have to, but you can't shoot because I have the girl here."

"Do as he says," Barbara pleaded.

Arch dropped the gun on the floor. Red came across the room and retrieved the gun. He swore, then smashed the barrel down on Arch's head in a fit of temper. Arch sagged to his knees.

"Get up," Red ordered, grabbing hold of his collar and heaving upward. "We have to get out of here, and you're going to take us." Red shoved Arch toward the front door.

Grayson said, "If they heard that shot they'll be here before long."

"What did you expect me to do, let him take me?" Red answered, his voice nasty.

Grayson didn't answer, and they went out onto the front porch. There was a stirring across the wide yard, and then a voice carried across to them.

"Is that you, Tuttle?"

Red jammed the pistol into his ribs and Arch shook his head, trying to clear it. "It's me," he answered weakly.

"Who's that with you?"

"Barbara White," he answered.

"Nate Grayson escaped from jail," the man called. "Keep a lookout and don't take any chances." The man wandered off into the darkness.

Red Pelser shoved Arch roughly down the steps of the porch. Grayson followed close behind with Barbara. They were near the street when Grayson said, "We only brought three horses. We didn't figure on the girl."

"Let her go, then," Arch said. "She'll only be in the way."

Grayson chuckled. "I'll ride double with her."

Grayson held Barbara across the saddle in front of him. That way, she shielded him from any shooting attempt. They left town without anybody seeing them, and rode hard toward the east. Presently they entered the rought foothills of the Organ Mountains where Arch knew there was scant chance of being followed.

SOMETIME toward morning they reached a cabin deep in the mountains. It lay in a narrow canyon in which there was a small trickle of water. The hills were rough, almost without vegetation. The cabin was on the only level spot of ground Arch

had seen since they entered the mountains.

They were all tired. In the faint light Arch saw that Barbara's face was drawn and white. When they were inside the one-room cabin, he said, "I'm sorry, Miss White."

She smiled wanly at him. "You did what you could, Mr. Tuttle."

Grayson, his eyes red rimmed, glared at them. "Shut up," he said. "What's this 'mister' and 'miss' business? You two were engaged. Is it some kind of a code?"

Arch said, "You wouldn't understand," and lapsed into silence.

The outlaws took turns sleeping. Arch decided that they would not stay here but would ride on to some other destination. That evening Barbara cooked dinner on an old, broken-down stove. Then Red went out and climbed to the ridge above the cabin. When he came down he was as near smiling as Arch had ever seen him get.

"Nobody is following us," Red said. "We slipped clean away." He gave Arch a speculative glance, then turned to Grayson. "What do we need him for? We only have three horses. It'll be rough going from now on."

Grayson shrugged. "What are you waiting for, Red?"

Barbara gasped. She had been standing in one corner of the cabin, but now she came across the room rapidly. She stopped in front of Grayson.

"You can't just kill him!" she cried.

"Why not?" Grayson asked, chewing on the stub of a match. "He tried to get me hung."

"He didn't," she said, her voice tight. "He could have been a witness against you. We heard you talking down by the river."

"Barbara!" Arch's voice cut through the musty air of the cabin and she stopped talking, a horrified look on her face as she realized what she had divulged.

The grin dropped from Grayson's lips. He said, "You heard, both of you?" There was a look of disappointment in his eyes as he said the last words.

"Both of them," Red repeated significantly. He turned to Arch and said, "You're first. Get outside."

"No!" Barbara screamed. She ran at the redhead and began to grapple with him. He shoved her aside roughly and Grayson caught her as she fell back. The grin returned to his face as he held her close.

Red turned back to Arch. "Get going."

Arch didn't move, and Red's voice rose. "Do you want me to kill you right here in front of the girl?"

Arch went to the door of the cabin. He turned back once, his face white, and looked at Barbara, who had stopped struggling and was sobbing. He formed words to say, but Red shoved him on outside.

Grayson put himself between Barbara and the door to the cabin before he let go of her arms. When she was free she sagged to her knees and her body shook with her crying.

Grayson said, "You're wasting your time crying. Maybe if we make it into Mexico I'll let you live."

She raised her head and looked at him through her tears. "Do you think I'm crying for my life?" she said, her voice filled with disgust for the man before her. "I'm crying for Arch, for everything we might have had and didn't. But you wouldn't understand that."

"I reckon not," Grayson said. "I never had a chance to live like you and he did. I had to work for my living."

She got to her feet, her face was full of color now. Her words came hot and fast. "What do you think Arch Tuttle had to do? After they hung his father, he had nothing. He had to keep himself alive all the time he was studying law, and then he had to starve while he was getting started. It's no wonder that he—" she hesitated, and a startled look crossed her face as if she had just learned a great truth. She finished the sentence in a broken voice. "No wonder he take's anybody case if they have the money."

Grayson chuckled and nodded. He plucked the match stick from his mouth and said, "Now you've learned something. It all depends on how you look at it, doesn't it? Now you take me—"

He never finished the sentence, for the sound of a gunshot racketed up and down the narrow canyon. Barbara stared past Grayson. Tears began to flow from her eyes again, but she cried silently this time.

After the report of the shot Grayson grew restless. He began to pace the room. When Pelser didn't come back within a few minutes, he went to the door of the cabin and looked out. It was dusk, with the sun reflecting off the jagged rocks of the upper canyon.

He turned back into the room and said, "What in hell's keeping Red? It's time we were getting out of here."

Barbara wiped at her eyes with a handkerchief and said, "I'm thirsty, Mr. Grayson. I'd like a drink from the stream."

The outlaw, his face pulled down in a scowl, said, "Well, I'm not going to get it for you."

She went to the door. Grayson reminded her, "I'll be watching you."

She nodded and went on out, picking her way over the rocky ground to the trickle of water. Several rocks dammed up the stream into a small pool. She dropped down beside it on her knees and plunged her hands into it. For some time she stayed there, drinking and then daubing water on her face. She heard something behind her and turned to look. Her features nearly gave her away, but then she turned with an effort back to the water.

PRESENTLY Grayson called to her, but she didn't turn. She heard him leave the doorway and head across the gravel in her direction, his feet crunching rhythmically. But the rhythm stopped suddenly when a voice cut through the gathering darkness. It had an authoritative ring to it, a sound that a man couldn't help but obey.

She turned to look, unable to keep her eyes away. Twenty feet behind her Grayson stood poised, unable to believe what he was seeing. Up the canyon maybe fifty feet was Arch Tuttle, his face white, one arm hanging useless. In the other hand he carried a revolver.

Grayson went into action, but the gun in Tuttle's hand blossomed orange once, and then again, and Grayson toppled to the ground.

Barbara ran to Arch and flung herself into his arms. He swayed as he put his good arm about her. "My darling," she cried. "My darling."

He dropped the revolver at his feet and said, "Red got careless. I hit him with a rock after he thought he'd killed me."

There was no coldness in her now. The barrier had been broken, though he wasn't sure just why it had happened. He didn't much care. He kissed her, and she returned his kiss with ardor.

He lifted his lips from hers, but still she clung to him. He said, "Hey, what's going on here?"

"I didn't realize how much I love you until I thought you were dead. Then when Red didn't come back for a long time," she said, "I went outside with the hope that you might have gotten away somehow, and I could find you and tell you how I felt."

They moved toward the cabin and she seeemd to notice his arm for the first time. She slipped off his coat, then tore away the shirt. There was a lot of blood but the wound was not deep.

They passed near Grayson. She stopped, looking at him. She said, "I'm sorry he's dead. I learned something from him. You'd told me how it was with you, but I didn't understand until I heard it from him. I didn't realize that you might have become like him."

He didn't know exactly what she was talking about, but he did like the way she was looking up at him. He sensed the warmth in her, the love that he had known was there all along. He took her into his arms again and kissed her.

She pushed away from him and said, "We have to get back to Las Cruces, Arch. Your arm needs a doctor's care."

He smiled, for she had pushed away from him unwillingly, and he figured that never again would she dodge artfully out of his arms as she used to.

He sat in his office, his left arm in a sling. He was looking over some papers, but every so often he would raise his head and smile at Barbara, who sat nearby. The door to the street opened and a short, dark man came into the office. He saw Barbara there and started to back out again.

"Come in, Mr. Mata," Arch said.

The Mexican removed his hat and stepped to the center of the room.

"This is Mr. Raphael Mata, Barbara. Miss White."

Mata nodded and began to work at the brim of his hat with his fingers. "I have the money, Señor Tuttle." He shook his head. "I had to ride many miles to get away from the posse. I will be glad when you make me free."

"You told me you stole some horses, is that right?" Arch asked. "And you want me to get you acquitted after you give yourself up."

"Si, Señor. That is what I wish. You are famous. You can do it."

Arch got to his feet and went to the window. "Yes, I guess I could," he said, "but I'm not going to."

Mata flipped his sombrero out in a gesture of protest. "But you said, señor, that for two thousand dollars you would."

"I've changed my mind. I wouldn't touch it for ten thousand."

"But, señor—"

"That's all, Mr. Mata. Since I told you I would take your case and you came here for that purpose, I won't report you to the law. But I'd advise you to stay away from Las Cruces after this because, if I see you here again, you'll be behind bars before the day is over."

Mata's eyes glinted dangerously. Then his shoulders slumped as he realized that he could do nothing about Arch's decision. He clamped his hat on his head and left the office, after giving Arch a hard look. Arch sat down at the desk and began to go through the papers again.

"Thank you, Mr. Tuttle," Barbara said softly, leaning toward him.

He looked at her and smiled. "That's the way it's going to be, Mrs. Tuttle."

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. What are Zebus more commonly called in the cow country?

2. Supply the last names of the following old West scouts or explorers: (1) Zebulon ——, (2) Christopher ——, (3) Pierre ——.

3. What nickname for Negro troops in the frontier forts was originated by Indians and became commonly used, not in any derogatory sense, throughout the old West?

4. Is a martingale a (1) bird, (2) a gentle west wind, (3) a type of breast strap on a saddle horse, (4) an old West name for whisky with water?

5. Only three states classed as *western* cow country are producers of oranges and grapefruit for market. Name them.

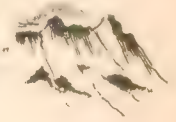
6. True or false: Texas is a county in Oklahoma.

7. Supply the last names of at least two of these famous rodeo stars, past and present: (1) Toots ——, (2) Casey ——, (3) Pete ——, (4) Turk ——, (5) Dee ——, (6) Booger Red ——, (7) Shoat ——, (8) Buff ——.

8. What famous (or infamous) outlaw did the native Spanish people of New Mexico call "El Chivo" (CHEE-vo)?

9. What was the original name of the New Mexico town and postoffice now called (ugh!) Truth Or Consequences?

10. The Lost Dutchman Mine or the Dutchman's Lost Mine is supposed to be in the Superstition Mountains, in what state?



——Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 68. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

GHOST OF THE

ROCKING G

by BEN FRANK

LORA HAD NO ONE ELSE to turn to but bitter Johnny Garland . . .

who thought all women were creatures sent to do the Devil's work

ON THIS sultry, coppery day in August, the swaying railway coach was hot, grimy, and charged with the sickening fumes of smoke, steam and oil from the big-funneled locomotive. The grasslands, their monotony broken only by an occasional rocky ridge or a red-fisted butte, rolled in all directions to meet a distant, empty horizon. In the northwest, ugly clouds lifted their bluish-black and white heads.

But nineteen-year-old Lora Custer watched the approaching storm without interest, for her mind was clogged with a frightening uncertainty. I shouldn't have let them talk me into this, she kept thinking over and over.

A small, slender girl, she sat alone on the red plush seat, a streak of afternoon sunlight touching her honey-blonde hair and turning it to gold. She was dressed cheaply but neatly, and the tired, too-old expression that haunted

her blue eyes said plainly that life had not been easy or happy for her.

Perhaps, she thought a little desperately, he'll change his mind, too, and then everything will be all right.

A name caught her attention. It was spoken in contempt by one of two men who sat directly behind her. They were big, hard-fisted men with the stamp of the outdoors about them. They had boarded the train at the last stop and had given her the kind of doubtful scrutiny that men are prone to give a pretty girl traveling alone in a man's world. After that they had ignored her.

"Al Mengel?" the second man said. "Hell, yes, I know the mangy coyote. He's forty-five, if he's a day. I hear he's picked up another young girl. Yeah, through some ad he put in the papers. How does he do it? He sends 'em pictures of himself taken twenty years ago. Claims he has plenty of money. No, they don't last long, not the way he treats 'em. The last one died in less'n two years. The one before her had the guts to run out on him."

The train was slowing with a grinding of brakes. Her face deathly pale, Lora stared through the window. This was not a town, she saw; there were no houses, just a small creek bordering the track. Suddenly she realized that the train was going to stop.

She straightened her slim shoulders. She knew now that she couldn't go through with it, even if Al Mengel had not lied to her about himself, and now was her chance to avoid meeting him. She caught up a battered suitcase and her worn purse, and almost ran to the back of the coach.

"This isn't Cassberg, miss," the porter said. "We're just stopping here at Seven-mile Crossing to take on water."

"I know it," she said, forcing the words past a tightness in her throat. "My friends are to meet me here. It's closer to their ranch, you know."

Flashing him a disarming smile, she let him help her to the ground. Her eyes whipped about, to the panting locomotive, the big wooden water tank topped by a huge windmill, and the cottonwoods along the creek.

"I don't see your friends," the porter murmured.

"They'll be along," she said, stepping away from him.

Nothing must stop her now—the loneliness, the approaching storm, the porter, nothing! Deep in her heart, from the very first, she had felt the wrongness of coming to marry Al Mengel, a man she'd never met. But the people she'd been living with had wanted to get rid of her, and Mengel's letters had seemed to offer hope and escape.

"It's going to rain, miss," the porter said, scowling.

The train jerked forward, and he swung up on the steps. He still looked worried. She waved, and he waved back, and then she was alone—alone in a strange world of tall brown grass swept by a fitful, ghostly wind.

There's nothing to be afraid of, she assured herself. I'll just wait and catch the first train going east.

She sat down on the suitcase and opened her purse. She had less than five dollars. Suddenly, she buried her face in her hands and wept. But not for long, for a rumble of thunder jerked her eyes skyward.

The sun had disappeared behind the churning black clouds. The wind had died, and now a frightening hush lay over the trees and the water and the endless prairie. She stood quickly and looked about. As far as she could see, there was no sign of life. Then, from among the growth of cottonwoods, she heard a shout and a great hoot of laughter; and a moment later three riders came splashing across the creek. Suddenly a new terror leaped into her. She was a girl alone, defenseless in a strange land.

HIS full name was John Adams Garland, but everybody called him Johnny. A tall, lean young man, he rode a horse as if he'd grown up in the saddle—which he had practically done. With a feeling of unease fiddling through him, he slowed his horse to a walk and gazed up at the stormy sky. He saw that he'd get soaked before he reached home. But Johnny Garland had been soaked to the skin before. So it wasn't the approaching storm that sent the unease fiddling through him.

Thinking about it, he guessed that Al Mengel had something to do with the way he felt.

Mengel had just crossed Johnny's path, mean drunk, slashing his black horse with spurs. Johnny wasn't afraid of the big, ugly man, but he hated anybody who abused a horse. Also, Mengel's black animal had reminded Johnny of Max Lester, the cattle and horse buyer from St. Louis. And, thinking of Lester, Johnny had been swept back into the great tragedy of his life.

The faint, distant hoot of a locomotive came to him. That would be the passenger train from the east, whistling for Seven-mile Crossing. But Johnny's thinking now revolved around Max Lester, and a great bitterness made his young face look old and hard. In spite of the approaching storm, he decided to take the side trail that led through Boulder Valley.

It was in this valley that Max Lester had died. Sometimes it was good for a man, so Johnny often told himself, to ride through a place that reminded him of how a beautiful woman had damned one man to a life of hell on earth and another to a never-ending hate.

He halted at the top of a ridge and gazed down at the irregular patterns made by the great granite boulders that dotted the valley. A drop of rain stung his cheek. Ignoring it, he rode on. By the time he reached the willows that surrounded the spring, it was raining fitfully. But he scarcely noticed it. He didn't even think to put on his slicker.

It was here near the spring that he and the others had found the bodies. Max Lester, a look of surprise on his handsome face, had been sprawled beside the woman's slender body. Even in death the woman had been very beautiful, Johnny remembered, her soft blonde hair wet with the night's dew and gleaming in the morning sunlight. And, Johnny remembered, her small, pearl-handled sixgun was still gripped in her slim, lifeless fingers.

Now a great burst of thunder rolled out of the dark sky overhead, jerking Johnny Garland's mind back to the present. His young-old face grim with the bitterness in his heart, he rode on among the scattering of huge boulders.

How could she have done a thing like that? It was a question he'd asked himself countless times during the past four years. As far as he was concerned, there was only one answer. She had done it because she was a woman. To Johnny, whose experience with women had been limited to this one particular girl, this answer made sense. Also, it made all other young and pretty girls fit subjects for his hate and scorn.

Coming up out of the valley, he rode through the darkness and the downpour toward his home.

THE water splashed high about the three riders as they crossed the creek. A stooped little old man led the way, Lora saw. The second man was lanky, long-jawed, and thin-nosed, the third beefy-faced and squat. They wore black-butted guns strapped to their waists, and looked to her like the kind of men who would shoot anyone at the drop of a hat.

She glanced wildly about for a hiding place. But before she could move, they'd spotted her and come charging up out of the creek.

"Who're you?" the oldster demanded.

Now they'd pulled up beside her, their horses snorting and shaking water from their bellies.

"I'm Lora Custer," she answered, trying to hide her fear. "I got off the train at the wrong stop. When the next train comes, I'll catch it."

Whether or not they believed her story, she couldn't tell. But the way they stared at her gave her a feeling that finding a girl here had disturbed and angered them.

"There won't be any train till morning," the old man growled, "and it's going to rain cats and dogs." He turned to glare at his two companions. "Have you two any ideas what to do with this filly?"

The two younger men stared at her out of hard, unfriendly eyes. "Maybe we'll have to take her home with us," the beefy one muttered.

"And get our ears pinned back?" the lanky cowboy said, laughing shortly. "No, thanks, Paden!"

The old man suddenly made the decision for them. "We'll take her anyway. There's no place to leave a girl out here."

The lanky man swore softly.

"Shut up, Omaha," the old man cut in. "Who's bossing the Rocking G, me or you?"

"You," Omaha admitted. "But I tell you, Jeff, taking her to the Rocking G is a mistake."

"We can't leave her out here all night," the beefy man said.

"Thanks, Paden, for siding me," the old man said, grinning faintly. "Hand your suitcase to him, miss."

"No, thank you," Her fear turning to panic, Lora began to edge away from them. "I'll stay here. I don't mind a little rain."

"Let her stay, Jeff," the man called Omaha said quickly. "There's no sense in our starting troble."

"Shut up!" the old man said again. He held out a rope-gnarled hand. "Grab hold, miss, and swing up."

"No!"

A forked streak of lightning shot across the sky, followed by a crash of thunder.

"Don't argue!" the old man bellowed.

She looked up at their hard, scowling faces. She'd better do as she was told than have them force her to obey. She handed the battered suitcase to the red-faced Paden, held out her hand, and let the oldster swing her up behind his saddle.

"Hang on," he said, and booted his horse into a run.

"What I'd like to know," Omaha yelled, "is what the heck we'll do with her after—"

The rest of his words were lost in the clatter of hoofs.

Clinging to the old man's gun belt, Lora closed her eyes against the lash of the wind. She had lived on a farm when she was a child. She was used to horses, so the wild ride didn't frighten her particularly. It was the unknown that lay at the end of the ride that filled her with dread.

The first drops of rain had begun to fall when they swung into a narrow canyon. Coming out of a break in the canyon wall, Lora saw a valley dotted with tall trees. They angled toward a granite fishback. Rounding a ragged gap in the ridge, she had her first glimpse of the barns, and a rambling two-story ranch house that looked old and gray in the growing gloom. But from a window came a cherry gleam of lamplight, and gray smoke twisted from a brick chimney into the wind and scattered rain.

The old man swung Lora to the ground. "You take the horses, Omaha," he shouted. "Run for the house, miss."

Lora ran and reached the shelter of a wide front porch just ahead of a burst of thunder and a deluge of rain. The old man—Jeff Oaks, foreman of the Rocking G, he'd told her he was—and the beefy-faced Paden were close behind.

"We made it just in time," Oaks said, opening the door for her.

She found herself in a large front room, lighted by a brass lamp hanging from the ceiling.

"Make yourself at home," Oaks said; then he and Paden disappeared through another doorway.

LORA sank down on a big chair near where Paden had left her suitcase. Her eyes flew about. There was comfortable furniture, but old and shabby; a big stone fireplace without a fire in it; some pictures on the walls, of horses and Western scenes; deer antlers cradling a long-barreled rifle; a big walnut-framed clock that had stopped at a quarter past three; an open stairway leading to the floor above. There were no rugs, no curtains. This was a man's house, she knew instinctively.

Hearing the sound of shuffling footsteps, she glanced around, and saw that Jeff Oaks had returned to the room, followed by a shaggy-headed old man who wore a flour-spotted apron over his levis.

"Her name's Lora Custer," the foreman said.

The stranger gazed at her, and the scowl on his round, red face deepened. "You're a danged fool, Jeff Oaks!" he exploded. Then, mumbling something Lora couldn't catch, he hobbled from the room. Oaks followed him, and again Lora was alone.

Her dread mounting, she glanced wildly about the room. Perhaps this was a good time to make her escape. She caught up the suitcase and headed for the door, but a movement on the stairs caught her attention. Glancing up, she saw a chubby-faced boy, his wide blue eyes fixed curiously on her.

"Well," she said, forgetting her intended flight, "who are you?"

Lora knew this kiss was wrong and he meant it to be that way

"I'm Davie," he answered soberly. "Who're you?"

"I'm Lora." She smiled.

He came on down the steps, smiling shyly.

"You're a woman," he stated. "My mamma was a woman, you know. I saw her picture once. She had on a white dress and was holding a baby, and my daddy had his arm around her. I was the baby."

She set down the suitcase and stepped over to where he stood at the foot of the stairs. For some reason, his words both puzzled and troubled her.

"How old are you, Davie?"

He shook his head. "Did you come from hell, Lora? That's where my mamma is, you know."

Shocked, she could only stare down at him

for a moment. "Davie," she said at last, "you mustn't say that."

"What's going on here?"

Jeff Oaks came thundering into the room, an angry glint in his old eyes.

Davie smiled up at him. "I was just telling Lora that my mamma's in hell. You see, I heard--"

Oaks caught the boy up in his arms and swept him out of the room. A moment later he returned alone. "A kid like that, miss—well, you don't want to pay too much attention to what they say. Supper's ready."

Still shocked by the boy's words, Lora followed the old man through a long hallway into a large, brightly-lighted kitchen. The two men, Paden and Omaha, were already seated at the big oak table. They didn't bother to stand up or even to glance at Lora. The white-haired cook, muttering under his breath, stood by the big range, wiping his hands on his apron. The boy, Davie, was not in the room. Oaks indicated her chair by a nod of his head.

Lora sat down. One chair remained vacant. She wondered about that, but asked no questions. The food was passed without much talk, and the meal progressed in silence. To Lora it seemed that a frightening tenseness filled the room. But the food was good, and she began to eat hungrily, in spite of her feeling of dread.

Outside, the rain and wind had almost died away, but thunder still rolled across the sky. She wondered what had become of the child, if he were being punished for having spoken to her. She was about to ask when there came the slam of a door. The men stopped eating and looked uneasily at one another.

"Now the fireworks'll begin," the cook said, grinning mirthlessly.

"Reckon I'd better go look after Johnny's horse," Omaha muttered. Shoving to his feet, he hurried through a side door and was lost in the wet darkness.

Lora heard the clatter of boots against a bare floor, the jingle of spurs. Again she glanced at the men. The cook had gone back to the stove. Paden's red face seemed redder than ever. Old Jeff Oak's jaws were clamped shut, his eyes worried.

The footsteps halted abruptly, and a man called, "Hi, Davie, old boy! How're tricks? What's that? A woman?"

Johnny Garland flung himself through the kitchen doorway. Tall, rangy, thick brown hair plastered to his head, he stared at Lora out of narrowed dark eyes. He was twenty-one or two, Lora guessed, and his lean, brown face had gone as tight as a drum.

IN THE impact of his angry gaze, she felt his dislike, his mistrust, his scorn. This man hated her, and she'd never seen him before in her life. He hated her, she knew suddenly, because she was a woman. She thought with a flare of anger that this man had consigned all women to hell, including Davie's mother.

"Johnny," Oaks wheezed, "this is Lora Custer. Lora, Johnny Garland, owner of the Rocking G."

Johnny Garland opened his mouth to speak, but the old man hurried on. "Johnny, we were riding in from the south range, and found her at the water tank. It seems she got off the train by mistake. Since it was getting ready to storm—"

"Come here, Jeff," Johnny snapped. "You, too, Paden."

The two men shuffled into the hallway after the young rancher. Lora sat very still, both angry and frightened. It was beginning to rain again. She could hear the rumble of voices from the hallway. Suddenly Johnny Garland raised his voice.

"You found her, so you get rid of her! I don't give a damn what you do with her. Take her back to the tank. Take her to town. You know I won't have a woman staying in this house!"

Jeff Oaks came back into the kitchen. He had a hangdog look. "Come on, miss," he said.

She stumbled after him along the hall and into the front room. Johnny Garland stood facing the empty fireplace, his lean back rifle straight. He didn't turn to look at her.

"Miss Custer—" his voice was hard— "for reasons that are none of your business, you will have to leave this house immediately. My foreman will take you to Cassberg."

Oaks picked up Lora's siutcase and headed

for the door. She had turned to follow when Davie called from the stairs, "Don't go away, Lora. I like you."

He came running toward her, but Johnny Garland leaped forward and caught the boy up in his long arms. Lora ran out into the night. Paden and Omaha had hitched a team to a covered spring wagon and had driven it up close to the house. But even so, she was soaked before she reached it.

A great streak of lightning forked across the sky, and a shattering blast of thunder shook the earth. Oaks helped her up under the canvas shelter and climbed to the seat.

"Dang that fool Johnny, anyhow!" he muttered. "If I hadn't worked on the Rocking G for his father and his brother, I'd quit.

"Wait a minute, Jeff," Omaha called. "Johnny's yelling."

Glancing out under the dripping canvas, Lora saw the young rancher against the lighted square of doorway. Unmindful of the torrent, he swung down to the ground and strode toward the wagon, the light from the lantern glistening on his wet face.

"Okay," he said wearily. "It's a bad storm. She can stay till morning."

"What's he got against me?" Lora whispered to Oaks.

The old man ignored the question. "Make a run for the house," he said gruffly.

Once again she stood in the big front room, wet and shivering, feeling the impact of Johnny Garland's dark, unfriendly eyes. "I'm sorry to be so much trouble," she said. "However, coming here wasn't my idea."

He stopped her with a shake of his head. "Don't bother to explain or make excuses. I said you could stay the night, and that's that."

He found a key on the mantle and gave it to her. Then he handed her a lighted lamp. "Up those stairs, first door to your right," he said. "You may want to remake the bed, and you're welcome to use any of the clothes. They'll fit you nicely, I think. Good night."

She picked up her suitcase and climbed the stairs. She fitted the key to the lock of the first door to the right. It turned unwillingly. She went into the room and locked the door on the inside. Rain rattled against the double windows. Thunder rocked across the world. For a moment, she stood shivering and listening to the fury of the storm. Then she set the lamp on a dresser and gazed curiously about.

It was a woman's room, with thick rag rugs, lacy curtains, and fine maple furniture. Dust was thick everywhere. A smell of mustiness hung in the dead air. Her eyes turned to a photograph that lay on the dresser, the picture of a lovely, fair-haired woman holding a baby in her arms. That must be Davie's mother, she thought.

A tall, rangy man stood beside the woman, his arm about her. Johnny Garland, was her next thought. But a second and closer look told her she was wrong. This man was too old to be Johnny. On the back of the photo she found the names "Darlene," "David," "Chris." Chris, Lora decided, must be Johnny's older brother.

A small calendar lay on the dresser, open to the month of July, and a ring had been drawn around the number "17" as if that might be an important date. The calendar, she noted with some surprise, was four years old. She explored a clothes closet. There were lovely dresses, all carefully hung on wooden hangers, and a rack of shoes, most of them nearly new. Everything was in apple pie order.

BACK in the bedroom once again, Lora noticed the small, silver-trimmed gun belt hanging at the right of the door. The holster was empty. She opened the drawer of a big chest and discovered the baby clothes, hand-sewn, beautifully made, neatly folded. She thought of the hours of work that must have gone into the making of those tiny garments, and a sudden mistiness came into her eyes. The woman who had made those clothes with such loving care could not have been bad, she thought.

Presently, she crossed to the windows and opened them. The rain had stopped for the moment, but thunder still rolled. Directly below lay the flat wet roof of the kitchen.

While she stood there, wondering about the woman who had occupied this room, lightning hurled across the sky and the rain began again. Closing the windows, she turned to survey the room and to bring the woman, Darlene, to life in her mind. She must have been a lovely

young woman who liked nice things and knew how to take care of them; who loved her baby; and who was loved by the man, Chris.

What had become of Darlene and Chris? What had Darlene done to make young Johnny Garland so bitter? The answers were beyond here. Slowly she began to get ready for bed.

At last ready to crawl into the big old bed, she was about to blow out the light when she heard a child's cry during a lull in the storm. Hurrying to the closet, she slipped into a green silk robe that hung there. It fit her perfectly, and she realized with a sudden shock that she and Darlene must have been alike in many ways. The crying came again and, catching up the lamp, she stepped into the hallway.

Davie's room was at the far end of the hall. She set the lamp on a stand beside his bed. Seeing her, he stopped crying.

"Hi," she said, smiling. "I didn't go away, after all. What's the matter, Davie?"

But she knew that the storm had frightened him, as storms used to frighten her when she was a lonely child. She sat down on the bed and ran her fingers through his hair.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," she said. "Want me to sing you a song? Okay, close your eyes."

She began to sing softly, and soon he was sound asleep. Smiling, she tucked the covers around his small shoulders and turned toward the door. Johnny Garland stood in the doorway, a twisted smile on his big mouth, a smouldering light in his dark eyes. She had no way of knowing how long he had been standing there, watching, listening.

"Looks like you beat me to him," he said. His eyes swept over her and narrowed. "Nice," he said softly. "In that robe you're almost a dead ringer for my brother's wife."

Her heart pounding, Lora drew the robe a little more tightly about her slender body. She picked up the lamp with her free hand and walked toward the door. Johnny moved out into the hall to let her pass, then followed her to the door of her room.

"Darlene turned out to be quite a gal," he said. "Want to know what she was like?"

"If you care to tell me," she answered.

"I can show you better than I can tell you."

He took the lamp from her and set it on a hall table. Grinning faintly, he caught her by the wrists.

"This will give you some idea of what she was like."

He pulled her roughly against him and kissed her hard on the mouth. And for a blinding moment, there was no will in her to resist his arms and his burning kiss. Then, suddenly, she knew that everything was wrong, because Johnny meant it to be wrong, and she broke his hold and struck him with all her strength. Turning, she ran into her room, locked the door, and stood with her back against it, gasping for breath.

She could still feel the fierce strength of his arms, the rudeness of his kiss. For a moment she was burning with anger. But her anger passed, for she knew that his actions were not so much a personal insult as a way of showing his contempt for all women.

Shivering, she crawled into bed. Lying there in the darkness, she began to analyze her own emotions and actions. Ever since she had been old enough to dream, she had hoped someday to meet a man like Johnny Garland. But in the stark reality of life, the dreams had faded until she'd almost forgotten them. Then she'd had those letters from Al Mengel.

Those letters had revived her dormant dreams. And those awakened dreams had fooled her into making a promise she hadn't been able to keep. She had come all the way from a small Missouri town to marry a man she'd never met. What a fool she had been!

For a long time she lay awake, puzzling over the tricks that life and fate had played on her. Was meeting Johnny Garland just another of those cruel tricks? At last her weariness won out, and she fell asleep.

THE sun through the double windows awoke Lora. It was when she hung the green robe in the closet that she discovered the slip of yellowed paper in a pocket. "R.R. fare to St. Louis, $18.20," she read. "Room, $12.00. Other expenses, $25.00." Puzzled, she returned the paper to the pocket.

While she was eating breakfast alone in the big kitchen, Jeff Oaks came stamping in. "As

soon as you're ready, we'll head for town," he said stiffly.

Later, when she went outside, she found him waiting for her in the spring wagon. "Hop in," he said, "and we'll get started."

She climbed in beside him and glanced toward the house. It looked pleasant and cheerful in the warm bright sunshine. She wondered where the child, Davie, could be. She wondered if some thanks were not due to Johnny Garland for putting her up for the night—even if he hadn't wanted her in the house.

Oaks started to unwind the lines from the brake handle, but didn't. Following the direction of his gaze, the girl saw a team and buggy plowing along the muddy trail at a fast pace.

"That's Al Mengel," the old man muttered. "He lives a couple of miles north. Now what would bring him here?"

The name sent Lora's heart racing. She stared at the approaching man out of frightened eyes. She saw a flat, ugly face covered with graying stubble, and a big, flabby body. He jerked the blowing team to a stop, and his narrowed eyes touched Lora's eyes briefly and then moved slowly over her. Looking pleased, he took a bite from a large plug of tobacco.

"Reckon I've found who I'm looking for," he said. "The porter on the train said a girl got off at the water tank. I would've looked for you last night if it hadn't been so stormy."

Jeff Oaks stared hard at Mengel. "Just what're you talking about?" he demanded.

"She's Lora Custer, isn't she?" Mengel's eyes had turned flinty. "She looks like her picture. Maybe she didn't tell you she came here to marry me."

He turned his gaze on Lora's frightened face. "How come you got off the train at Seven-mile Crossing instead of Cassberg? What was that you said to the porter about some friends meeting you?"

Johnny Garland had stepped from the horse barn. Hands on his narrow hips, he stood spread-legged, surveying Mengel. "You say Lora came here to marry you?"

"You heard me," Mengel snapped.

"Yeah, I hear you, all right. I just don't believe it." Johnny turned to Lora. "Is he telling the truth?"

"Yes," she answered faintly.

"Hop out of that wagon and climb in here with me," Mengel said, grinning. "We'll get acquainted on the way to town to see the preacher."

"No," she said, fighting to hold her voice steady. "I've changed my mind. That's why I got off at the water tank."

A dangerous light came into Mengel's eyes. But he laughed and shook his head at her. "You can't back out now, girlie." He climbed from the buggy. "I paid your train fare here, didn't I? You bet I did. And I have your letter saying you'd marry me."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Mengel," Lora began, "but—"

"Want me to drag you out of that wagon?" Mengel said, his anger getting the upper hand. "You came here to be my wife, and I'll be damned if you back out now."

"Just a minute, Al," Johnny Garland said quietly. "Maybe you didn't exactly play fair with her in your letters. Maybe she has a right to change her mind."

"You keep out of this, Garland!" Mengel warned.

"Maybe I will, and maybe I won't." Johnny lifted his eyes to the girl's frightened face. "Do you want to go with him, Lora? Yes or no."

"No."

"You heard her, Al," Johnny said in that same quiet voice.

Omaha and Paden had come out of the barn and were watching Mengel out of narrowed eyes. The big, flabby man shifted uncertainly from one foot to the other.

"I know my rights," he muttered. "I paid for her train fare."

"How much did you send her?" Johnny cut in.

"Fifty dollars," Mengel answered. "But you can't buy her from me by paying it back."

"I'm making her a loan of fifty dollars, Al." Johnny dug a roll of bills from a pocket. "You and the boys can be witnesses to that."

Mengel took one more look at the grim faces of the Rocking G crew. Angrily he stuffed the bills into a pocket, climbed back into his buggy, and drove out of the yard. Once he'd reached the trail, he whipped his tired team into a run.

JOHNNY watched him out of angry eyes until he disappeared over a hump in the prairie. Then he turned and grinned faintly at Lora. But when she started to thank him, he scowled and said, "Don't get me wrong. I just don't like Al Mengel."

He strode toward the horse barn, but turned back suddenly.

"Believe I'll take her to town, Jeff," he said. "Bring me the rifle, Omaha—just in case Al decides to make something out of this business."

The rifle in hand, Johnny swung up to the seat beside Lora. Unwinding the lines, he drove into the trail. Her heart beating wildly, Lora waited for him to speak. But he sat there, staring straight ahead as if he'd decided there was nothing more to be said.

"Thanks, Johnny, for helping me," she said finally.

"Forget it," he said, flushing slightly. "I figured after that show I put on last night for you, I owed you something. And as I said before, I don't like Mengel."

"You have my thanks, anyway," she said quietly, "and someday I'll repay your loan."

When he said nothing to this, she asked, "Do you want to hear my side of how I got into this mess?"

"I already have a pretty good idea," he said. "Al offered you the things all girls want —money, nice clothes, a good time."

"There's a little more to it that that," she said, meeting his anger with an angry gaze of her own. "I wanted a home, too, and was willing to do my share to have one. You see, I'm an orphan and was living with some distant relatives who didn't want me. They saw Mengel's ad in a paper. I let them talk me into it, I'll admit, but I was desperate, Johnny. All the way on the train, I knew it wasn't right, that I could never go through with it unless I fell in love with him. Then I heard two men talking about him, and knew he'd lied to me. I knew I could never fall in love with a man like him. So when the train stopped at the water tank, I got off. I was afraid to go on."

Whether Johnny believed her story, he didn't say. "The thing for you to do," he said, "is grab the first train back to your old home —even if you *aren't* wanted. Do you have enough money to get you there?"

She didn't want him giving her more money, so she said, "Don't worry, I'll make it fine." She didn't tell him she would never return to a home where she wasn't wanted.

"Now," he said, staring straight ahead, "I'm going to tell you about Darlene, the ghost that haunts the Rocking G. After last night, I guess I owe that to you, too."

Listening as they rode along the muddy trail, she learned of the tragedy that had turned Johnny Garland into a man who distrusted women, whether they were good or bad. To begin with, Johnny said, there was Chris, his older brother, whom Johnny had loved with all his boyish heart.

"He was sort of both father and mother to me," Johnny said huskily.

Then Chris had gone East on a business trip and had brought the girl, Darlene, back with him. He was married to her, and madly in love with her. Johnny saw in her someone who had come between him and his brother, and he'd hated her at first. But as time went along, he got used to her being around; then he found himself beginning to like her. When little Davie had been born—well, by then he'd sort of gone overboard for Darlene, and he was crazy about the baby.

"But," Johnny said bitterly, "she had us fooled."

She became friendly, he told Lora in a tone of anger, with a cattle and horse buyer by the name of Max Lester, a handsome, dashing young man who came to the Rocking G to talk business with Chris, but who spent most of his time laughing and joking with Darlene. She'd loved horses, so she would go with Lester for long rides on some of the fancy horses he shipped in from Kentucky.

Then, one day, Chris had gone south to see about buying some bulls. The night before his return, Darlene had slipped out of the house and gone to meet Lester at the spring in Boulder Valley.

"She didn't come home that night," Johnny said bleakly. "The next morning we knew what she was."

The next morning, Darlene's and Lester's bodies had been found, side by side. The small gun that Chris had given his wife soon after their marriage was still gripped in her hand.

"There were powder burns on her dress,"

Johnny said. "It didn't take much figuring to know she'd shot Lester and then had shot herself."

Now Johnny's face was white with the memory. "You see, this Max Lester was the kind who had girls all over the country. 'Love 'em and leave 'em' was his motto. But it didn't work with Darlene. If she couldn't have him, nobody else could.

"As for Chris, it was the end of the road for him. He started getting drunk all the time; he didn't care what happened to him. He died under the hoofs of a mean bronc. And he was the best horseman in this part of the state. He loved horses, too—and he let one kill him."

NOW Lora understood the reason for Johnny's mistrust and bitterness. And she knew that as long as his memories haunted him, as long as Darlene's ghost stalked the Rocking G, his life would be warped and unhappy. She felt a great pity for him.

"Why?" he asked angrily. "Why did she do that to Chris? He was good to her; he gave her everything she wanted."

"I can't answer that, Johnny," Lora said.

Suddenly she stopped speaking to stare wide-eyed at him. In her mind's eye she was seeing Darlene's room again—the clothes so neatly hung in the closet, and the baby things so carefully folded and put away. She remembered the photograph of Darlene cradling the baby in her arms, with Chris's arms about her. Perhaps she knew Darlene better than she had realized.

"Johnny, is her room just as it was when she left it?"

"Yes," he answered. "Chris moved his stuff out and locked it up that same day. I've kept it locked, too. No one's slept in it since then, until last night. But there wasn't anyplace else to put you."

"Johnny," she said, "I don't believe Darlene was the kind of person you think she was."

"You're crazy!" he shouted, his face flaming angrily. "Chris was coming home the next day. She had to have a showdown with Max before Chris came."

"Who made those baby clothes?"

"She did. She used to sew all day."

"She isn't guilty!" Lora said with conviction. "She's not the ghost of the Rocking G. There's another one, Johnny. I've no idea who it is, but it's not Chris's wife."

She could see that he didn't believe her, so she hurried on, "Someone could have taken her gun. That was the holster I saw in her room, wasn't it?"

"Nobody could have sneaked up to her room. Someone was around the house all that evening."

"Then it must have been you, or Jeff Oaks, or Paden."

"Are you trying to tell me that one of us shot Darlene and Lester?" Johnny interrupted angrily. "You've really gone loco!"

"I'm trying to tell you someone could have taken her gun. She would have taken the holster if she'd been planning to use the gun herself."

"Maybe she didn't want anybody to know she had the gun. A gun's easier to hide than a holster."

"There's that low kitchen roof under the windows."

"What about it?"

"Why couldn't someone have ridden up behind the kitchen after dark, climbed up on the roof and stolen the holster?"

"She went to meet Lester," Johnny said doggedly. "She had the gun in her hand when we found her. There were powder burns on her dress. Anyway, no one would want to kill her."

"Someone might have wanted to kill Max Lester," she said. "And he wanted Darlene to take the blame for it, perhaps. If there'd only been a woman at the ranch, someone to see how nice she kept her room, to see those baby clothes, to understand—she might have been able to convince you and Chris that Darlene wasn't the kind who could do the things you've accused her of. Did this happen four years ago, on July 17th?"

"It was the sixteenth," he said harshly. "That's a date I'll never forget."

"Someone drew a ring around the 17th on that old calendar in her room."

"Oh, that. That was the day Chris had promised to be home. It was his 27th birthday, too. Quite a birthday present for him—his wife in love with a St. Louis horse trader."

"Did you say the man was from St. Louis?"

Johnny nodded. "Why?"

"Nothing," Lora said in a small voice. "I lived not far from there once."

But there was more to it than that. She was remembering the slip of paper in the green robe. "R.R. fare to St. Louis, $18.20."

Suddenly Lora felt very tired, as her defense of Darlene Garland crumbled to dust. She wondered if she should tell Johnny about that condemning slip of paper. She knew she had angered him by casting doubts on Darlene's guilt, because he had believed for so long that Chris's wife had done this awful thing. But Lora could not bring herself to add anything more to Johnny's hate by telling him of the paper.

They rode in silence. The sun lifted high in the sky; the air grew hot and humid. Lifting her eyes, Lora saw the straggling town in the valley below.

"Cassberg," Johnny said shortly.

"Johnny," she said humbly, "perhaps Darlene was guilty. But that doesn't give you the right to condemn all women."

"Forget it," he said in a gritty voice. "Sorry I ever told you about it. Where to, the depot?"

"Yes," she answered in a tired voice.

LORA waited in the shade of the faded depot until Johnny had driven from town. Then she picked up her suitcase and walked slowly along the main street. She had no idea where to go, or what to do. Having less than five dollars in her purse gave her a panicky feeling whenever she thought about it.

She came to a restaurant. It was small and drab on the outside, but the inside looked clean. A sign in the window said, "Waitress wanted." Straightening her shoulders, Lora went in. The plump, graying woman behind the counter eyed Lora curiously.

"What'll you have, honey?" she asked.

"I'm looking for a job," Lora answered.

"You wouldn't be the girl Al Mengel was looking for last night, would you? What happened, honey? Did you change your mind?"

"I decided I couldn't go through with it," Lora answered.

"Good for you! I've met a lot of men in my time, and in my book they don't come any meaner than Mengel." The woman pulled a white apron from under the counter. "I'll give you a try. My name's Elizabeth Jansen. Folks usually call me Aunt Bess." She chuckled. "Unless they happen to remember I used to be a dancehall girl."

That afternoon, when the noon rush was over, Aunt Bess said, "You've got yourself a job, honey."

In a trail-end cowtown like Cassberg, news gets around fast, Lora soon discovered. A few days later, the Rocking G crew drifted into the restaurant. Old Jeff Oaks led the way. Scowling, Omaha followed. Behind him came the heavy-set Paden, a faint grin on his round red face. They sat at the counter and ordered pie and coffee.

"We were surprised to hear you were working for Aunt Bess," Oaks rumbled. "We kind of figured you'd put as much distance between yourself and Mengel as you could."

"Why should I?" Lora asked.

"You never can tell about that polecat," Omaha said. "He might cause you a heap of trouble, one way or another."

"I'm not afraid of him." Lora said.

"Keep your eyes open, anyway, Lora," Paden said, and Omaha and Jeff nodded in agreement.

After that, the three men ate in silence, and then stamped out into the hot street. With trembling hands, Lora began to stack the dishes. She hadn't told them the truth when she'd said she wasn't afraid of Al Mengel.

A few afternoons later, she was standing by the window when two men rode into town, left their horses in the shade, and headed toward the restaurant. They were the two men who had sat behind her on the train and had unwittingly warned her about Mengel.

"Are we too late for dinner?" one asked.

Aunt Bess had gone shopping, and Lora was alone. But she told the men she would serve them.

"Say," the second man spoke up, "aren't you the girl who got off the train at Sevenmile Crossing the other day?"

"Sure she is," the first man said. "She did that to dodge Al Mengel, and I don't blame her."

The men began to eat.

"Speaking of the devil," the first man mut-

tered, "there's Mengel now."

Lora glanced through the window. Mengel had stepped from an alley. He halted to stare toward the restaurant, then went on along the street. Watching, feeling a touch of unreasonable fear, Lora saw him shove into the saloon. Perhaps, she thought, he won't come looking for me after all.

The two men finished eating and departed. As she worked, Lora wondered just what she'd do if Mengel should come here while she was alone. She remembered the way he had looked at her at the Rocking G, and shuddered. The creak of the screen door made her jump. Turning, she saw Johnny Garland, tall, rifle straight, a look of bitterness about his big mouth.

"So you're still in Cassberg," he said grimly. "Didn't I tell you to go back where you came from?"

Suddenly she was furious with him. "Who're you to tell me what to do?" she demanded. "Anyway, I happen to like it here, and I have a job that'll help me pay off a debt." She reached into a pocket of her apron, found a five-dollar bill, and slapped it down in front of him. "There's the first payment. In nine more weeks you'll be paid in full, and then you won't need to worry about me."

Slowly Johnny grinned. "There's no hurry."

"Yes there is!" For some reason his grin made her more angry than ever. "I can't get you paid soon enough to suit me."

He didn't touch the money. "Forget it, Lora."

"Take that money or I'll stuff it down your throat, you woman hater!"

Suddenly Johnny laughed. "I believe you would, at that." Now there was a look of respect in his dark eyes as he put the bill into a pocket. "What I really came in here for was to tell you that Al Mengel doesn't forget or forgive. To him your refusal to marry him is a personal insult. He's mean and dangerous. I have a hunch you'd be safer someplace else."

So Johnny Garland had been worrying about her. A quick warmth replaced Lora's anger. But she said firmly, "I'm not going to let him or anyone else frighten me into leaving here, Johnny. Do you know, this is the first place I've lived since I was a child where I was wanted and was treated kindly."

"Okay." Johnny turned toward the door. "But don't say you haven't been warned."

NOW she was ashamed of her anger, and she wanted to tell him so. "Thanks, Johnny, for bothering about me. I'm sorry I blew up a few minutes ago."

"Forget it," he said, his dark eyes turning angry again. "And don't get any wrong ideas about the reason I came here to warn you. I just don't like Al Mengel and the way he treats horses—and people he doesn't like." He went out, letting the screen door slam.

Why, she wondered miserably, must one of us always say something that makes the other angry? Suddenly she was very tired, and wanted to cry.

Presently Aunt Bess came bustling in with a huge sack of groceries. She took one look at Lora and said. "You look beat, honey. Why don't you go home and rest for a couple of hours?"

Lora stepped out into the street, and there stood Mengel, his heavy shoulders against the front of the saloon. She almost ducked back into the restaurant. But he had seen her, and to run now would only show him how much she feared him. Her head held proudly erect, she went on. She would not look at him.

But when she came even with him, he said, "Hello, girlie."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Mengel," she said with dignity.

But she made the mistake of looking at him, and the hate in his eyes made her heart pound hard and fast.

"A woman only makes a fool of me once!" he said softly.

Almost running, she passed him. His laughter followed her along the street. Once in Aunt Bess's small, quiet house, her fear subsided. She kicked off her shoes and stretched out across her bed. Then she realized how tired she really was.

Afterward, she was never sure what awakened her. But she sat up with a start, and there stood Mengel in the doorway, watching her out of smouldering eyes. He had her old suitcase in one hand and his gun in the other.

"One sound out of you, girlie, and you'll get hurt bad!" he said harshly. "Put on your shoes."

She was too terrified to disobey. She couldn't even think which shoe went on which foot.

Watching her, Mengel laughed and slid his gun into the holster.

"I reckon you aren't going to be any trouble," he said. "Come quietly, and we'll get along fine."

She walked beside him to his buggy, which stood in front of the house in the hot, empty street. He helped her in and handed up the suitcase. Looking wildly about, Lora saw no one. But she knew that if anyone were watching, he would have no reason to think she was being forced to go with this man.

Mengel climbed in beside her and headed the rig out of town at a leisurely gait. But once beyond sight of the last house, he whipped the team into a run. By then Lora had begun to think more clearly and calmly.

"Just what do you intend to do with me?" she asked.

"Marry you," he said. "You suit me fine for a wife."

"I'll never marry you!"

"There are ways to make a woman change her mind," he said in a hard, flat voice.

She began to shiver. "You can't get away with this. Kidnapping is a serious offense."

He laughed shortly. "Who's to say I'm kidnapping you?"

"I'll tell everyone."

"It would be hard to prove. You brought along a suitcase full of your clothes, didn't you? Some folks saw us talking back there on the street. I told around that you said you'd changed your mind, that I was to pick you up and take you to the ranch. Now, if you claim I kidnapped you, what's to keep me from claiming you figured out the whole business to make me pay you to keep your mouth shut?"

She stared at him, wide-eyed. "No one would believe you."

He laughed again. "Do you figure anybody would believe you, a girl who came out here all by herself to marry some man she never met before? Besides, who's to care what becomes of you? Bess Jansen? She used to be a dancehall girl, and there's been plenty of talk about her. Johnny Garland, just because he lent you money? Maybe you never heard him say what he thinks of women."

Now Lora's shivering had turned into a cold sickness churning around in her stomach. Sooner or later she might escape from Mengel. But by that time, would it matter? She lifted her eyes in despair. The trail ahead was empty. Behind, she could see nothing but the thick dust. Then, looking past Mengel's ugly face, she saw the horseman break into the open over a low hill.

MENGEL saw the rider, too, and his eyes narrowed. "Maybe I was wrong about Garland," he muttered. "But he hasn't a chance. He'll be afraid to use his gun; there's too much chance of your getting hurt. Reckon I'll let him ride up close so I can get him with my first shot."

"They'll hang you for murder," she said hoarsely.

"In this country, girlie, they don't hang a man for shooting another in self-defense."

Cutting across the open, Johnny gained rapidly, and Lora watched him out of terrified eyes. She saw the sixgun slapping against his leg. Mengel had been right; Johnny would not risk using his gun.

"Johnny, Johnny—" it was a prayer running through every fiber of her being—"don't come any closer!"

But, bending low, he came thundering toward them, his deep-chested roan kicking up puffs of gray dust. Lora saw Mengel ease the big gun from his holster and thumb back the hammer. She saw the gun lift for the kill; she saw the boulder looming up on her side of the road. With a little cry, she caught the left rein in both hands and pulled with all her strength. The buggy lurched, and a wheel smashed against the boulder at the same moment as there was an explosion from Mengel's gun. Lora felt herself hurling through the air. The last thing she remembered was a jarring, grinding pain.

When Lora opened her eyes, she was dimly aware of two hazy faces hovering above her. The one with the graying mustache, she saw presently, belonged to a stranger. The second face was Johnny Garland's.

"Stop worrying," the stranger said to Johnny. "There are no broken bones. After a good night's rest she'll be all right." He picked up a black bag and walked out.

Lora's eyes swept around. There was something familiar about this room, the maple furniture, the double windows. It was Darlene's room. Lora stared wonderingly at Johnny.

"It was closer here than to town," he said, "so I brought you here."

She saw that his left arm was in a sling, and that his face looked very pale. "What happened to your arm, Johnny?" she asked.

"Mengel and I had an argument," he said, his face grim. "You won't have to worry about him bothering you again. He didn't give me any choice, Lora."

Then Johnny dropped to his knees and wrapped the fingers of his right hand around her fingers. "When I heard some talk on the street about how Mengel claimed you'd changed your mind and were going to the ranch with him, I knew he had some plan to get even with you. Bess told me you'd gone home for a nap. I went to her house, and you were gone. I never was so scared in all my life, Lora. And when I saw you in that buggy—"

She felt a shudder run through him.

"What I'm trying to tell you," he said, getting to his feet, "is that, no matter what Darlene did, I was wrong in believing all girls were like her. I'm sorry, Lora."

For a long minute he stood looking down at her as if he had something more to tell her. But he didn't say it. And, after he'd gone, she knew that what he'd wanted to say would now go unsaid.

By nature Johnny Garland was proud and sensitive, and the great tragedy of his life had caused him to build a protective wall of hate around his pride. Even if he had fallen in love with her, he'd never ask her to marry him—never, because, in saving her from Mengel, he had put her under obligation to him. His pride simply wouldn't let him ask a girl who owed him a debt like that to be his wife, because her decision might be influenced by her obligation.

Suddenly, Lora realized why she and Johnny could so easily become angry at each other. They were both too proud and too sensitive. Knowing this, Lora felt her own pride stripped away, as the hot tears ran along her cheeks.

The next morning, discovering that her dress was ruined, Lora looked in the closet for something to wear until she could locate the suitcase. She chose faded jeans and an old shirt. For some reason she hesitated to wear any of the lovely dresses that Darlene had so carefully hung in the closet.

Old Jeff Oaks was alone in the kitchen, drinking coffee, when Lora went in to breakfast. Seeing her he gave a start. "For a minute," he muttered, "I thought I was seeing a ghost. The day Darlene died, she had gone riding in that outfit. She came back to the house just about sundown, I remember, and ran up those stairs to her room. That was the last time I saw her alive. I rode to a line camp that evening to see about some calves, and when I got back she was gone."

"Jeff." Lora asked, "do you really think she did it?"

"At first I did. But as time goes by—well, I'm not so sure any more." Then, as if he didn't want to talk about it, he said, "Better eat your breakfast. Johnny aims to take you to town this morning."

HE WENT out, leaving her alone. Lora poured coffee into a thick cup and sat down at the table. Leaning forward to reach the sugar, she became aware of the paper in the shirt pocket. It was a crumpled envelope, addressed to Mrs. Chris Garland and postmarked July 14, four years ago.

Lora didn't take out what was in the envelope, for she felt its contents were none of her business. But she was still staring at the envelope when Johnny came into the room.

"I just found this," she said. "It was in the shirt pocket."

Johnny dug out a single sheet of paper. Reading it, his face paled. Then, without a word to her, he shoved the paper into her hand and stumbled from the room.

"Dear Mrs. Garland," she read. "Here is my check for the money you gave Louise so that she could go to St. Louis and wait for me. I don't know how to thank you for your kindness to her. But I do know one thing for sure—once she is free and becomes my wife, she will have a better life than she has had these past two years. Gratefully yours, M.L.

"P.S. As I promised, will meet you the night of the 16th at the spring with the horse

for Chris's birthday present. Sorry I can't be at the Rocking G to see his eyes pop when you give it to him."

Max Lester's check for $55.20 was still clipped to the letter.

Little Davie was playing in the yard, and he told Lora that Johnny had gone into the horse barn. She found him just inside the big door, sitting on a bale of hay. When he lifted his face, she saw that it was wet with tears.

"Was Louise Al Mengel's wife?" she asked gently.

Johnny nodded. "The one who ran away. He treated her like a dog. I remember now how sorry Darlene was for her, and how she was always trying to do something to make things easier for her."

Again Johnny lowered his face, hiding it from her. "Mengel must have come here that night, looking for Louise. Maybe he climbed up to look into Darlene's room, thinking Louise might be there. Maybe he took Darlene's gun and followed her to the spring. Or maybe she took the gun and he got it away from her someway. We'll never know for sure, and I guess it doesn't matter. What matters is that Chris and I were wrong about her. We were wrong about Lester, too."

Lora sat down beside him. "I judged her wrongly, too." She told him about finding the slip of paper in the green robe. "The past can't be changed, Johnny; there's nothing you can do for Darlene and Chris. But you can make sure that when Davie is old enough to understand, he learns the truth—that his mother was good and she loved him."

Again the tears ran down Johnny's cheeks. And she let him cry, knowing that the tears were the only thing left of his hate. Then, when he put his good arm around her and held her close, she knew something else. Johnny Garland would never let her go again.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 51)

1. Brahmans, Brahmas or Braymers.

2. (1) Zebulon Pike, (2) Christopher (Kit) Carson, (3) Pierre Chouteau.

3. Buffalo soldiers.

4. (3) A saddle-rigging breast strap running from bit to cinch between the horse's front legs, intended to keep him from tossing his head.

5. California, Arizona and Texas.

6. True.

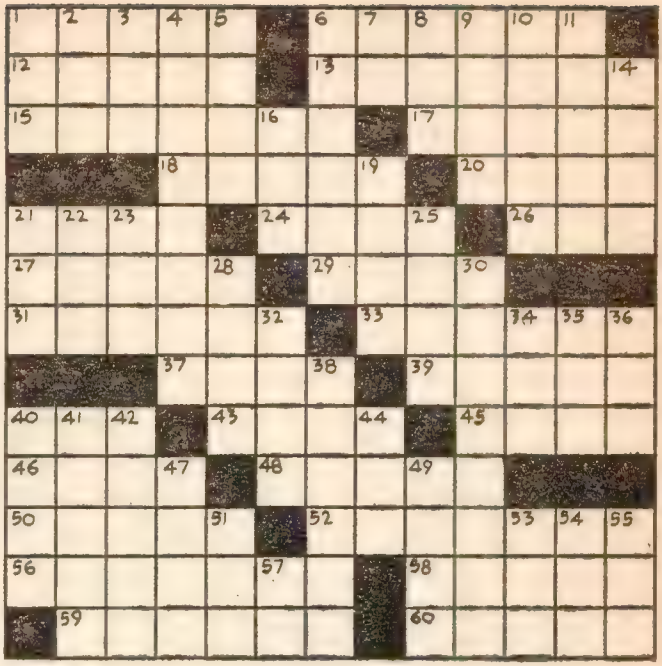
7. (1) Toots Mansfield, (2) Casey Tibbs, (3) Pete Knight, (4) Turk Greenough, (5) Dee Bibb, (6) Booger Red Privett, (7) Shoat Webster, (8) Buff Douthitt.

8. Billy the Kid. "Chivo" is Spanish for "kid."

9. Hot Springs.

10. Arizona.

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1. 1955 Rodeo Champion
6. Lariats
12. Perfect
13. To stir up
15. Lover of one's country
17. Challenged
18. —— Cantor, comedian
20. Coarse grass
21. Atom ——
24. Poultry products
26. Not wet
27. Regions
29. Horse's dinner
31. Southwestern cattle farm
33. To hate
37. Variety; sort
39. Miss Wilson of TV
40. The girl
43. To require
45. Western plateau
46. Labor
48. To pry
50. Once more
52. Sixty and ten
56. Grazing land
58. To love
59. Western squatter
60. Western trousers

S	T	A	R	■	S	T	A	M	P	E	D	E
L	I	M	A	■	C	O	R	P	O	R	A	L
I	R	O	N	■	E	A	T	■	S	A	N	K
D	E	S	C	E	N	D	■	H	E	■	■	■
■	■	■	H	A	T	■	S	A	D	D	L	E
S	T	E	E	R	■	D	A	Y	■	R	O	Y
P	O	D	S	■	F	A	T	■	M	O	P	E
O	N	E	■	Y	A	M	■	R	O	P	E	D
T	E	N	D	E	R	■	T	E	N	■	■	■
■	■	■	U	S	■	M	U	S	T	A	N	G
I	C	E	D	■	H	I	S	■	A	R	E	A
M	A	V	E	R	I	C	K	■	N	A	I	L
P	R	E	S	I	D	E	S	■	A	B	L	E

Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

DOWN

1. Waiter's expectation
2. Miss Lupino, actress
3. Wager
4. Without a saddle
5. Slipped
6. Cinch-tightening strap
7. Agent General (abbr.)
8. Mr. Caesar of TV
9. White mark on horse's face
10. Rowed with oars
11. Western beef animal
14. Nelson ——, singer
16. Lyric poem
19. Minced oath
21. Barrier
22. Oratorio (abbr.)
23. Cowboys
25. Plant stalk
28. Front part of leg
30. Panicky rush of cattle
32. Units
34. Before
35. Little girl (colloq.)
36. Hot beverage
38. Thicker
40. To exchange (colloq.)
41. Navaho Indian lodge
42. To rub out
44. Female deer
47. Sets of tools
49. Egg-shaped
51. Hard-shelled fruit
53. November (abbr.)
54. Three (prefix)
55. Not "no"
57. Musical note

Red River

TWO PEOPLE in the stagecoach had reason to

fear the marshal . . . the fleeing outlaw, and

the woman hiding behind a mask of pretense!

LEW JENISON had it figured out before he rode into Caddo Springs early that morning, for there wasn't much strength left in him. Despite a night's rest along the creek outside of town, he couldn't take another day's punishment in the saddle. The stage rolling in had decided him. He'd board it, rest while he traveled, and save time.

Some of his drive returned at sight of the coach drawn up before the hotel. But when he dismounted, the numbed weariness was still there. His left arm felt stiff and sore. He tried not to favor it as he walked slowly inside.

A rawboned, thick-shouldered man stood in the lobby. He turned, his stare blunt and stolid, when Lew stepped to the desk.

The south-bound stage, the clerk informed Lew, would be leaving as soon as the passengers finished breakfast.

"I'll take a ticket to Red River Station," Lew told him.

"Red River Station?" The clerk hesitated. "Nobody ever gets off there.

"I'm going to. How much?"

"Sixteen dollars."

A sinking feeling deepened in Lew, but he said after a moment, "Hold me a place. I'll be right back."

"Yes, sir, mister—"

"Early—Frank Early."

"Better hurry. Texas Jack's on the box today."

Lew went out, hating the thing he had to do. But he didn't have sixteen dollars. He led the gelding across the street to the livery barn and found the owner lounging in the runway entrance. He was a wizened man whose bargainer's eyes were already sizing up Lew's rangy dun.

"I want to sell my horse and saddle," Lew said.

"Happens I'm fixed up for both."

"Bet you're not for Morgan geldings," Lew said.

Stage

By FRED GROVE

"You can't tell me anything about horses, mister." The sharp glance was busy again on the gelding.

"Then you know what he is. Make me an offer."

The runty man said nothing. Instead he circled the dun and stopped at its head, his practiced fingers prying open the gelding's mouth. "I'll make you an offer," he said, dropping his hands. "Thirty dollars for the horse and saddle."

Lew felt a swift anger. "I didn't come in here to give 'em away."

"Take it or leave it. Any man who wants to sell his horse as bad as you do can't be choosey. For all I know, you could be Lew Jenison or Walt Flynn on the run."

"And you could get shot for loose talk," Lew reminded him tightly. "In the first place, that's no fair price."

"Just depends. "If you don't think so, why don't you ask Ben Sitters?"

"Ben Sitters? Who's that?"

"U. S. marshal. You'll find him at the hotel."

A cold sweat came over Lew. "You've got me over a barrel," he said. "The stage leaves in a minute. It's robbery, but I'll take it."

Moving back to the hotel, he saw the passengers filing out. The big man lingered out front, and something told Lew this was Sitters. Lew bought his ticket and boarded. He had scarcely seated himself by a window when he saw Sitters start toward the coach. A chilled dismay touched Lew as Sitters climbed in. Too late, Lew realized that in his hurry he'd overlooked the possibility of Sitters as a passenger. The next moment Lew relaxed. They were total strangers to each other.

Lew made six. There was, he learned as the morning wore on, a Miss Dant, also bound for Red River Station. Womack, a thin tubercular who was heading West, sat next to Lew. And rubbing elbows with Womack was young McNair, an army lieutenant returning from furlough to his Texas post. Rambo, a newspaper correspondent from Chicago, was wedged between the girl and Sitters.

It was Rambo, chatting in his inquiring manner, who kept the desultory talk going above the grind of the six-horse coach.

"Mr. Sitters, this is my first trip through Indian Territory. Do you expect any trouble with hostiles?"

"Some Kiowas busted off their reservation," the big man muttered, and left it there.

"No need for alarm, though," put in McNair, with a reassuring nod for Miss Dant. "A patrol works between Red River Station and Rock Gap." Blond and boyish, he looked very gallant in his cavalry jacket and yellow-striped blue breeches. A budding mustache topped his pink mouth.

Womack coughed into a silk handkerchief. "There's little we could do about it anyway," he said, and took a morose drink from his canteen.

Lew didn't join in the conversation, and he noticed that Miss Dant paid little attention, except to glance at Sitters now and then. He decided she might be twenty, not a year more. She had an air of breeding about her. Her hair, worn long under her plumed hat, was so black it gave her well-formed face the ivory shading of a cameo. It was, he thought, a face that should have been amused and softly turned, but wasn't.

Sitters hunkered like an old bulldog watching his front-yard gate. Whenever Lew looked at Sitters, the man's tenacious interest was always present. Lew tasted dust fuming up between the floorboards, and felt July heat condensed in the confined space. He stared out the window, all tight inside, aware of the steady pounding within him.

Rambo's voice came again, suddenly loud in Lew's ears. "Mr. Sitters, when I came through Kansas the papers were full of the Porter gang's last desperate raid at Pawnee Flats. It must have been quite a show—righteous citizens defending their little bank."

"What about it?" Sitters grumbled, annoyed.

Rambo's shaggy eyebrows lifted. "The story doesn't end there. Two men got away."

"Just who," Sitters asked softly, "would you have in mind?"

"None other than Messrs. Walt Flynn and Lew Jenison. Where are they?"

"That's a good question," Sitters parried.

Lew, cold and tense, saw Miss Dant become quietly attentive.

"Flynn had a record," Rambo went on.

"Jenison did not. He was a horse rancher, I believe—" he shook his head—"till the day he walked into the bank with the gang. In a way, it's puzzling."

"What's so puzzling about a bank robber? Nothing I can see."

"Maybe not. Anyway, the Eastern papers eat it up. And now we have a mystery. Are Flynn and Jenison alive? The posse found Jenison's dead horse. What do you think?"

"They're alive, all right," Sitters said firmly, his tone bragging.

RAMBO looked pleased and waited expectantly for more. But Sitters did not elaborate, as if he thought he'd said too much already. Miss Dant eased back. The whole thing made Lew wonder what Sitters really knew.

The trail grew rougher, and talk tapered off. When the stage found smoother going, Miss Dant murmured to Rambo, her voice sounding rich and pleasant to Lew, "Do you intend to write an account of what you just told us?"

"Indeed I do, ma'am, just as soon as I reach civilization again—say Fort Worth. And I'll wager you know something I could include, something of general interest. There must have been considerable talk in Caldwell about the Porter gang." He paused, and his eyes appreciated her openly. "I suppose your father's in business there?"

She colored faintly, and Lew noted the level set of her small chin. She spoke distinctly, without apology. "My parents are dead. I sing in a music hall."

"Sorry, ma'am." Rambo covered up in haste. "No offense meant."

"Oh, that's all right. As for the Porter gang, I'm sure Mr. Sitters, being a marshal and all, knows more about it than anybody." She turned to Sitters. If there were any guile in her smile, Lew couldn't find it.

Sitters squirmed and reddened. "Enough's been said," he replied.

Rambo grinned. Even Womack seemed to enjoy the by-play this once. McNair fixed his freshening interest on the girl, who showed just enough disappointment to make it convincing.

Lew speculated about her. Red River Station was no more than a jumping-off place for longhorn herds trailing north through the Indian Nations to railheads in Kansas. There was no dancehall at the river settlement, nothing for a pretty girl. In fact, she didn't look gaudy enough to be an entertainer.

Toward early afternoon, with Fort Sill and a string of relay stations behind them, Lew sighted a rambling log house and corrals along the trail. This was Rock Gap, the last stop before Red River Station.

A quick-eyed man, gripping his rifle, appeared in the doorway.

"Howdy, Augie," Texas Jack called. "Why are you all forted up?"

"The Kiowas are on the loose, or haven't you heard?"

"Yeah, we heard." Texas Jack's voice was scoffing. He called to his passengers, "Twenty minutes to eat and stretch."

Like a jack-in-the-box, Lieutenant McNair hustled out to be the first to assist Miss Dant. A thin-shanked boy unhitched the horses.

Inside the low-roofed house, Lew looked around for Sitters. He was coming behind, and Lew sensed that Sitters had deliberately trailed him in. McNair and the girl entered. She chose a chair beside Sitters.

While a woman brought platters of greasy food, Augie told Texas Jack, "Britt's ranch was burned out yesterday. Why don't you wait up and go on early tomorrow with the patrol?"

"Wait?" Texas Jack drained his coffee cup. "There wouldn't be a stage line if we holed up every time the Injuns got wild." He rose presently, muttering, "Five minutes," and took long restless strides from the smoky room.

Lew dallied over his coffee, watching the girl smile at Sitters. Then she stood up and McNair sided her out.

Womack observed them, his eyes sick, bitter. "Youth and health," he said. "You can't beat it." He left with Rambo.

Lew went out, hearing the scrape of Sitters's chair as he passed through the door. There was yet time to kill before returning to the cramped coach, so he strolled to the pole corral. Several geldings, all bearing saddle marks, milled among the relay bunch.

His glance stopped on a saddle slung over a pole. Temptation took hold of him for a long moment; he let it grow. Then a scuffing sound rubbed at his senses. He turned.

"Nice saddle stock," Sitters said around his cigar.

Lew nodded.

"I don't figure Augie'd take to the notion of somebody helping himself."

"Wouldn't blame him."

Sitters scowled his exasperation. "You're mighty close-mouthed. What name are you using today?"

Lew felt the fear rise in him, but he looked Sitters in the eye. "Same as always—Frank Early."

"Where're you from?"

"Nebraska."

"Uh-huh. As usual, it's from far off."

Texas Jack's restless, "Come on!" rolled across the yard, and Lew strolled away, taking his time. He was seated when Sitters boarded the coach.

Womack was late. He puffed up, dangling his wet canteen. When McNair offered a supporting hand at the step, Womack rejected it scornfully. "I can handle myself."

Afternoon heat made everybody silent and dull. Now Lew saw broken hill black with mesquite and humped with rocks. Sometimes flat stretches of short-grassed prairie appeared. Mindful of his injured arm, he tipped his hat forward and pretended to doze.

The squeal of brakes aroused him. Texas Jack yelled in warning and Lew, jerking up to look saw stones blocking the trail. One shot slammed from the hillside. Texas Jack toppled from the driver's seat like a loose bundle.

Lew was moving through the door. He said, "Stay inside," and jumped down, hearing the racket of the frightened horses. Another report sounded as he ran forward. A lead horse screamed and thrashed down.

With a sense of shock, Lew bent over Texas Jack. One glance at the still shape was enough.

AS LEW straightened, a whoop shrilled to his left among the mesquite-studded rock ledges. He rushed to the stage, to find Sitters and McNair piling out.

"Watch behind you!" McNair cried, and fired with the warning. There was a quick howl of pain.

Coming around, Lew saw coppery, half-naked shapes growing. He drove his shots at them, aware of McNair and Sitters working their hand guns. Suddenly the brown figures broke and scrambled for cover.

"We can't stay here," Lew said. His eyes sought the up-trail slope, and fixed on rock rubble and boulders. "Let's get up there!

McNair hesitated, glancing at Texas Jack.

"He's past help," Lew said.

Lew swung to the coach door. He reached for the girl and she came willingly, light and tense in his arms. Womack lurched out behind her. He swayed weakly against the stage, his cartridge belt and pistol hanging ponderously around his slight frame. An arrow whispered and quivered in the coach paneling near his head. He jerked, and fired wildly.

Rambo came last. His black eyes were bright with fear, and he made an awkward picture gripping his pistol. Bleakly, Lew guessed that he and Womack wouldn't be much help. They ran to the rocks through a scattering of bullets and arrows, Womack gasping at each step.

"The patrol," McNair said hopefully. "It'll be along."

"When?" Sitters growled. "Christmas?"

"Three-four o'clock, I figure." But when McNair eyed the sun, his shoulders sagged a little. "That means two hours' wait, at least."

Looking around, Lew saw how it was. They lay on a rocky rise, which offered fair protection so long as the Kiowas didn't get it in their heads to rush them. Below the stage, where the hills quit, he could see the flats and the pale scars of the road straggling across the brown prairie. It reminded him despairingly of Red River Station.

Thoroughly miserable himself, he glanced in and felt sorry for poor Womack, who already seemed finished. Womack breathed with difficulty. Sweat beaded his flushed face. His labored coughing was a pain to listen to. Lew looked away, realizing there was nothing he could do.

Rambo, he saw, had recovered from his fright. He kept staring about numbly, a vast

disbelief etched in his face. Sitters had planted his hard vigilance on the Kiowas' positions—like a fox watching a rabbit hole, Lew thought. McNair sat quietly. Miss Dant made no complaint, and Lew found himself admiring her.

Something at the edge of the mesquite attracted him. Two warriors, crouched and swift, broke out like timber wolves. Screeching hate, they slanted straight for the coach. McNair and Lew fired almost together. One brave pitched and rolled, but the other raced on with drawn knife. It was Rambo, joining in, who knocked him down, just steps from Texas Jack's body.

"He wanted Jack's hair," Lew said.

Time dragged, and Lew wondered when the showdown would come. At intervals arrows slashed the rock. Miss Dant dabbed a tiny handkerchief to her cheeks. Womack mopped his punished face and lapsed into a siege of uncontrolled coughing. Moved, the girl patted his shoulder.

"If he just had some water," she said to no one in particular.

"Canteen's in the coach," Sitters muttered.

Rambo appeared to measure the distance. McNair shook his head regretfully. "He'll have to hold out till the patrol comes."

"If it does," Sitters growled.

A raw irritation burned in Lew. "You're a cheerful cuss, Sitters. That's what I like about you."

"I believe in facing the facts, that's all. You'd be smarter if you did."

Womack's coughing changed to a series of smothered gasps. Heat devils flickered in the glassy brilliance. Lew watched the sun edge slowly down its western course.

"About an hour yet." McNair was gauging the sky again.

Sitters's doubt followed like a dash of cold water. "What makes you so sure they still patrol this road?"

"It's a mail line. They have standing orders."

"Our luck's held this far," Rambo added, "except for Texas Jack."

"Luck's one item I don't depend on," Sitters said. "You never know when you'll be left high and dry." He hitched his thick-set shoulders. "Like this morning. A man in a mighty big hurry sold his horse in Caddo Springs. Would you say that was a mistake, Early, the end of his luck?"

"Who knows? Maybe that man's luckier than you think."

Everything had become quiet again. Womack's sudden coughing broke the lull. It hurt Lew to watch him fight it. The girl, who had removed her hat to shade Womack's face, patted him once more. Womack's feverish eyes mirrored gratitude.

Suddenly he wrenched to his knees. "Sorry, I can't stand it without water."

"You damned fool!" Sitters exploded. "Stay put!"

Womack swallowed visibly. A cough racked him. He turned his bloodshot gaze around, and Sitters misread it.

"Expect us to get you water?"

A hot pride fired Womack's sick eyes. "Nobody's asking you, marshal."

"Well, stay down. You'll draw fire."

There seemed to be an odd, furious strength working in Womack. He crawled several feet from Miss Dant, then whipped about. "Think I'd ask any man to risk his life for me?"

"I said stay down, you muddle-headed weakling."

Lew said, "Ease up on him Sitters."

McNair's shout drew them all around. Womack was climbing uncertainly over the rock barrier.

THE girl's shriek came as a tiny, piercing sound. "Don't let him go!" It was to Lew that she looked for help. He scrambled up. But before he could grab, Womack had slipped away, running.

"Well," said Sitters, who hadn't budged, "it's his hide."

For that, Miss Dant gave him her killing contempt. McNair and Rambo watched helplessly.

The surprise of Womack's dash helped him at first, Lew saw, for not until he'd gone half a dozen steps did the Kiowa's open up.

Lew yelled, "Cover him!" and the four laid their fire on the ledges.

Womack was only a few feet from the stage when he fell. Miss Dant screamed and half rose, and Lew yanked her down hard. Womack seemed to want to lie there forever while he fought for wind. Lew heard himself

shouting him on. Finally, in slow motion, Womack squirmed to his knees. He sank back, then heaved to his feet, reeling. He leaped wildly.

Lew's breathing stopped—and began again. It seemed impossible, but Womack was there, swaying, ducking inside the coach. He reared up with the canteen, clutched it high while he gulped. It was a long time before he put it down and looped the strap around his shoulder. For the moment he was sheltered, the stage between him and the ledges. The Kiowas weren't wasting precious lead or arrows on targets they couldn't see. They could wait, Lew realized darkly, until Womack started back.

The mocking stillness crowded against Lew. Miss Dant leaned forward, biting her lips, clenching her hands. Lew said, "Blast the ledges when he starts."

He felt every muscle in his body grow rigid as Womack stepped to the rear wheel and plunged into the open. Taunting screeches mixed with the weapons' roars. Womack took several strides, untouched. He came on in his dogged, weak-legged way that was neither run nor trot, grotesque and graceless. Lew had a surge of hope.

It was then it happened. One leg caved under. The impact of the bullet spun Womack. For an instant he hung in the air, his awkward, pitiful flight stopped. He sprawled, and Lew glimpsed his stricken face and heard the hair-raising whoops.

Somehow the sounds and the sight charged Lew with a cold rage. Then he was going fast over the guarding boulders, though he did not remember rising. It came to him that he was sprinting, and the curdling whoops were much clearer. A naked hackling swept up his spine.

Womack's agonized face took focus. Womack's voice grated hoarsely, "Get back! Get back!"

Taking a long breath, Lew lifted the wasted body, and was instantly shocked by the pain in his arm. A dim warning of sound came as he sprang up. He whirled toward it.

An Indian, his chest bloody, rushed howling from around the stage, his knife high. There wasn't time to shoot. Lew dropped Womack and grappled for the knife. They collided and rolled, the warrior slashing. Lew clamped one hand on the wrist above the knife. He felt his shirt tear as the Kiowa grabbed with his free hand, but now Lew had the wrist in both hands. He twisted savagely. The knife clattered. He snapped it up and drove it downward with all his strength.

The thud sent a sickish reaction through him. It also stirred him to his feet, hefting Womack, running, tensed for the strike and rip of pain. But it never came.

The smoky boulders were suddenly before him. He piled over and down, landing heavily. Rambo and McNair pulled Womack clear, and the girl became busy over him.

"Mister," Sitters said contemptuously, "you've got more luck than sense."

Rambo looked apologetic. "That Kiowa near Jack played possum. You were in the line of fire."

Lew could only shake his head, while he hacked for breath.

Miss Dant eyed him narrowly, in alarm. "You're hurt. Let me look."

Lew drew back, moved by an unconscious wariness. He shook off her hand. "I just tore it. See about Womack."

She obeyed, though she was not quite sure. Sitters watched intently for several moments, before facing front again.

"They're coming now," said McNair, hollow-voiced.

Lew looked. Slim, arm-waving men, their bodies shining like wet copper, were running forward. Rambo fired hurriedly and missed.

"Let 'em come closer," Lew warned. "It's got to be a big killing."

Scorning concealment, the warriors closed in. Arrows snapped against rock. Lew could hear the pounding feet. Painted faces, streaked scarlet and white, glittered like masks.

When they were at point-blank range, he breathed, "All right—now," and his gun roared.

For a moment the attack swept on, then all at once it melted. Ragged gaps came in the mass. Cries of frustration went up. But one brave, shrieking defiance, reached Miss Dant's boulder. Lew shot him in the chest and saw him topple backward. The whooping broke off and Lew was surprised to find that

he was holding her. She was trembling. He freed her and took a wary look.

It was just about finished. The handful of warriors were drifting away in sullen retreat, except when one wheeled to fire or spring an arrow. Presently they were beyond range, straggling around a hill. In a short time they were out of sight, traveling west on horseback.

It grew very still again. Only Sitters stood, gazing off toward the distant flats. Lew sat bowed, all the grind of the day hitting him at once. He loaded his pistol mechanically, and holstered it.

HE WASN'T prepared for Sitters's abrupt motion. There came a cruel, grasping pressure at the point of Lew's shoulder. He felt his shirt sleeve rip away, as he glanced up in dismayed astonishment. Sitters stood back, his pistol drawn. His other hand held a shred of shirt. Meaning exploded through Lew.

"Don't touch it," Sitters warned, when Lew made a motion toward his holster.

Lew glared. "What is this?"

"As if you didn't know." Sitters slipped in and snaked out Lew's pistol. "You're Lew Jenison, heading for Red River to join Flynn."

"I tell you I'm Frank Early."

Lew was aware of faces turned in his direction, of the girl raising and asking, "How do you know he's Jenison? If he is, why didn't you arrest him in Caddo Springs?"

"Because I wasn't sure till he tried to hide that healed-over bullet wound. See for yourself." Sitters looked amused. "I picked up his trail on a tip in Caldwell. He hid out till he could travel, then started south. Now we can go to Red River and pick up Flynn at the Porter outfit's old headquarters, near there. I know where it is, too."

"You're all wrong," Lew protested, prepared for Miss Dant's loathing and contempt. But, raising his glance to her, he found an expression which both puzzled and warmed him.

At that moment McNair yelled, and Lew followed his pointing hand. Something moved on the flats. A line of dust was growing. Horsemen. It flashed over Lew that they'd been visible for several minutes.

He saw Miss Dant twist, her eyes raking Sitters. "You knew the patrol was coming. You saw them first, but you didn't accuse him till you were safe." She stepped as if to go between him and Lew.

Sweeping out his thick arm, Sitters batted her aside. As she sprawled beside Womack, a hot coil of fury looped through Lew and he squared himself, fists knotted.

Sitters's gaze glittered. "Just wish you'd try it."

"Sitters, drop those guns."

It was the voice of Miss Dant, pitched high and yet determined. She had taken Womack's pistol, Lew saw, and she had Sitters covered from the side. Surprise froze Sitters for a second, but he still gripped the pistols.

"I mean it," she said.

Sitters drew in a deep breath. He hunched one shoulder to swing.

At once, Miss Dant fired. Flame darted as the barrel bucked, and Sitters dropped his guns as if they were hot coals. His face paled. He wasn't hit, Lew was aware, but she had shot close enough to convince him she meant business.

Sitters said, "You'll pay for this!" Shaking with anger he glared at the others. "You going to stand there and let her interfere?"

Womack braced himself against a rock. "To hell with you, Marshal," he answered, and spat at Sitters's boots.

A change slid across Sitters's face. He turned to McNair. The lieutenant shifted his gaze to the girl and back. "That goes for me, too," he said, an enormous disgust in his speech, and centered his Dragoon pistol on Sitters.

Next, Sitters drove his inflexible will at Rambo, almost pleading. The ghost of a smile flicked about the correspondent's mouth—a tight, humorless smile. "I'd say you're outvoted by four, which makes it unanimous." He hefted his pistol up, and his next words were clipped. "Frank Early, or Lew Jenison, or whoever you are, I'm sure you know what to do now. You have almost all day."

Lew was moving even before Rambo finished, scooping up his own hand gun and facing around. His stare went over the four of them, thanking them with his eyes. But as he stepped by them, the girl caught his arm.

"Take me with you."

"You?" he said startled. "You can't go."

"I can't stay here." She refused to let go, and flung her meaning toward Sitters. "You know that. Please!"

Aware of time going fast, he checked the patrol—so close now he could see the fluttering guidon. It was Sitters's vindictive face that decided him as he whipped back, and the realization that he owed her something. He didn't like it, but he said, "Come on." Sitters's angry shout followed them as they ran to the coach.

It took some moments to cut two horses free of the harness tangle. Afterward, he boosted her up and they rode east, away from the approaching column. Farther on they struck south.

There wasn't much of the day left when at last Lew halted. Not until now, with the broken bluffs of the river in sight, had he thought it safe to stop. "The station's not far," he told her. "You can make it from here. Thanks for helping me."

"You're not going in?"

"Not yet."

"But I can't either," she protested, and it struck him how young and lonely and attractive she was. "Sitters must be close behind us, and nobody would hide me. He'd find me. I want to go with you."

"You must have people around here. Else why'd you come?"

"I do, but not at the station. Not close. Later I'll go to them."

"Look," he said, a roughness entering his voice. "I've got a chore to do, a dirty chore, nothing for you to see."

"But what could be so terrible? Tell me."

Time meant everything now and he spoke fast, with a stored-up bitterness. "You heard Rambo say I'm a horse rancher. Well, that's how this started. Charlie Blue, a horse trader, asked me if I wanted some Morgan's priced right. Naturally, I did. One day a man who called himself Walt Flynn came to my place and said he had the stock Charlie mentioned."

"You mean you didn't know he was an outlaw?"

"No, I was new to the district. He showed me his horses. They looked good, and we headed for Pawnee Flats to close the deal. Outside town four men joined us, friend's of Flynn's." Lew took a sharp breath, relieved that he could tell it to someone. "Flynn and I rode ahead. We started into the bank. Then it happened—the shooting. I ran for my horse, Flynn with me. It was that or get killed."

"Was he hurt?" she asked quietly.

"Don't know. About the time we reached the hills my horse went down, and I'd been hit. Flynn rode on. But I found Charlie Blue's ranch that night. In a few days Charlie brought in a bunch of Texas trade horses, and he had all the news. Flynn was holed up on Red River. Posses were looking for me. Just Flynn and myself got away. The rest were wiped out—Buck Porter's bunch—and Flynn was one of 'em. So I knew they'd used me to get inside the bank," he finished with a dull anger.

"And now?" she asked gravely.

"I'm going after Flynn," was Lew's savage reply. "He's the only man who can clear me. He'll talk if I have to kill him!"

SHE became very hushed. Fear drained the color from her face.

"You still want to go?" he demanded, restless again.

"Yes. Maybe you'll need me."

They cut through a gap in the bluffs. Half a mile beyond he made out the few buildings of Red River Station. As they rode up the river, something told him it was wrong to have a woman along. But a hurry came over him, and he put his mind to the rough footing.

"It's not far, is it?"

Something in her tone, a nervousness, drew his eyes. She sat straight and tense, watching ahead.

"We're close. Anyway, it's not your worry."

He was beginning to question Charlie Blue's directions when he spotted the weathered shack, all but hidden in the cottonwoods.

Lew dismounted and ordered, "You stay here. If I don't come back, go to the station. Understand?"

She slipped down, giving him an uncertain nod, and he stalked ahead. Once he stopped and looked over his shoulder. She hadn't moved.

All was quiet in the tiny clearing around the shack, bathed in late afternoon shadows. He approached warily, his pistol drawn. At

the shack's corner he halted, suddenly alert to a muffled stamping. A glance revealed the long shape of a horse in the timber. He advanced toward the door, feeling a tingling sensation.

"Walt! Look out!"

Lew wheeled and stared. The girl was shouting as she ran for the shack. For an instant he couldn't believe it. Then her betrayal lashed him like a whip. It broke his paralysis, and he bolted to the door and kicked it open. A dim bulk loomed, and he saw the gleam of metal. He dived low, into an ear-blasting roar.

He felt the man grunt in pain and go down as he lunged for the pistol. He kept expecting the violent struggle of a hard-muscled body, but Flynn seemed slow. Lew ripped the gun from his hand and flung it aside.

A wild elation crying through him, Lew grasped Flynn's shirt and shook him. "Flynn, you'll talk!" Flynn's head rolled, and Lew gritted savagely, "Y'hear me? Talk or I'll pistol-whip it out of you!"

Flynn groaned as Lew brought his pistol up. At that instant he discovered the crude bandages across the bloody chest. Flynn's face looked waxen. His breathing was broken.

Lew's rage was still a terrible, killing thing. Yet a queer stab of protest checked him. He caught himself slowly and reluctantly releasing Flynn to the floor. Flynn fell back, and Lew knew then that he couldn't do it.

Miss Dant came from the door and dropped on her knees beside Flynn. She called his name, his first name. Flynn's eyes showed a glazed surprise.

"Vicky," he said, and his wondering voice seemed to come from a distance. "You came?"

"Yes, yes."

Lew could only stare at her, while a thickening disgust engulfed him.

"He's wounded," she said. In her anguish she turned to Lew. "Can't we do something?"

Lew's mind spun. Time was running out not just for Walt Flynn, but also for him. His voice sounded dead and flat. "We'll take him in."

He had his arms under Flynn's slack shoulders when he heard the sudden noise. It reached him dully at first, then grew quickly to the pounding of horses around the shack and men running and blocking the doorway. Ben Sitters's raw voice filled the room.

As Lew looked up, it came to him soddenly that he was beaten. His arms hung. He looked into the eye of Sitters's pistol; he made no protest when a man emptied his holster.

"Everybody outside." Sitters's face bore a triumphant grin. He glared at the girl and Flynn, instantly suspicious. "You, too, sister. Get up, Flynn!"

"This can wait," Lew protested. "Flynn's bad hurt."

"So what?"

"Shut up," Lew said, hearing the girl call. "Man, can't you see?"

Sitters stared hard. The shack got quiet. As Lew looked down he heard her say softly, "Oh, Walt, you're in a bad way. At least you can help Lew Jenison—clear him of everything. Tell us—"

FLYNN'S breathing was a tired, faint whisper. He said nothing.

"Speak for him, Walt," she persisted gently. "He's been good to me. He brought me here."

Lew saw Flynn's lips move—and then flatten.

"Then for me, Walt," she said. "And for yourself."

Flynn looked at her. He appeared to call on some last reserve of strength. His mouth stirred. "For you, Vicky, just you—because you came. We used Jenison for a front to get us inside the bank. We used a fake horse deal. That's the truth."

"He wasn't one of Porter's men?" she insisted.

"He never was."

Walt Flynn's fading voice seemed to hang in the room, until Sitters spoke in a let-down tone to Lew. "Well, your luck still holds. But what's she doing in this?"

The girl lifted her face to them. "I'm Vicky Flynn, Walt's sister. Isn't that enough?"

Purple dusk had fallen when Lew Jenison took the girl into the yard where the men were. Everything was over. When he saw her, so silent and stiff in the hazy light, a vast sympathy and gratefulness came over him.

"You're the only one Walt would have talked for, I see that now. You could have let

it pass, though. Why didn't you?"

"For his peace," she said. "That was one reason. And for you. You couldn't beat him when you saw that he was hurt."

Ben Sitters came over. "Some things about this don't fit," he began speaking to Vicky. "You claim you're Flynn's sister, but your name's Dant."

"Just a stage name," she replied. "When our folks died this spring, I came to Caldwell looking for Walt. I didn't want him traced through me. I never found him—till now."

Sitters mulled that over, then regarded her suspiciously. "Yet you knew he was hiding here?"

"No, I was following you, trying to find Walt before you did. To warn him."

"Following me?"

"Yes, Mr. Sitters," she said steadily. "You had too many drinks one night in Caldwell. You talked in the saloon. A lot of people heard you." Her face softened. She took his arm impulsively. "But I don't hold anything against you. You did what you thought was right."

Sitters eyed her. For a moment his dark anger massed. Then gradually, by degrees, his face relaxed. With a grunt, he left them.

"You told me you had people around here," Lew said, "but I know you don't. That means I'll have to put you on the stage for somewhere."

She faced away, mute, staring off.

"Better yet," he said, "we'll go to Pawnee Flats—both of us."

That turned her toward him, as he'd hoped it might. "They tell me," she said slowly, a smile breaking through her gravity, "it's very pretty country."

Coming up in the next issues of RANCH ROMANCES

THE AVENGING GUN

Stacey had thought no further than killing the man he hated . . . but he learned that murder is never so simple

By J. L. BOUMA

A Magazine-Length Novel

NESTER WAGON

If Chris let the sodbusters stay, he had to fight all the other ranchers . . . and the woman he wanted to marry

An Exciting Novelette

By ED LA VANWAY

THE GREAT DREAM

MacDonald came to Canada with nothing but two willing hands . . . and a faith strong enough to move mountains

A Western Short Story

By M. E. BRADSHAW

The White Chief

a Fact Feature

By FRED HARVEY

THE short but adventurous career of James Savage as the white chief of several Indian tribes around the Yosemite Valley is legend. It began when the first gold seeker headed West for California. Savage, who was twenty-nine years of age at the time, went to live with the San Joaquin Indians.

When the Mountain Indians attacked his San Joaquins, he fought beside them. His strategic maneuvers won them many victories, and he became their leader. Other tribes saw the value of the White Chief and asked to join them. He encouraged his tribe and these other Indians in raising crops, and built a trading post in the valley.

His young wife and daughter had died on the trek West, so he married into all the tribes, taking a wife from each one. By 1848 he was well known as a trader with great influence among the Indians.

He told his followers he wanted the yellow metal from the creeks and river beds, and for it would trade them colored cloth and trinkets. They outdid themselves to please him. Within two years he had accumulated a sizable fortune in gold. His trading post on the south fork of the Merced River was popular so he branched out on the Fresno River.

In the spring of 1850 his wives warned him that the Mountain Indians were on the warpath again. They burned both his stores, and he was forced to move to a safer place.

In October of that year, he decided to show off the white man's country to his followers, and took a retinue of Indians to San Francisco. They became a sensation to the local citizens dressed up as they were in their unusual regalia. When Savage returned to his burned trading post on the Mariposa, his appeals for help against the Mountain Indians were answered. The governor issued orders for a battalion to be organized, and Savage became a major.

The trouble with the valley and mountain Indians was straightened out. Savage helped make the peace treaty, giving the areas around the Fresno and King Rivers to the Indians.

Some people envied the Indians the King reservation and began squatting on the land.

A Major Harvey incited a number of men to jump the Indians living on the King reserve. A few squaws were killed, and many others injured. They complained to Savage, telling of the white man's violation of the peace treaty. Savage did his best to prevent further bloodshed, and denounced the peace violators.

Harvey, meanwhile, denounced Savage in equally strong terms, and said that if ever Savage set foot in the King's River area it would mean his death. Taking the dare, Savage went there.

He arrived the afternoon of August 16, and found Harvey and a Judge Marvin together. An argument began. Savage struck Harvey, knocking him down. As he did so, Savage's gun fell from his shirt and Judge Marvin picked it up. Harvey, seeing that Savage was unarmed, drew his own gun and fired five shots, killing him instantly.

Harvey was tried for murder, but with some finagling was cleared of the charges, and hurriedly left the country, fearing the Indians.

That night the Indians buried their leader. They built fires, and danced and sang mournfully, the squaws rocking to and fro. They sang of his deeds and conquests, to pave his way to the happy hunting ground. Then, sadly, they left their white chief to rest in peace.

"You can't fight them!" Rose Ann cried. "Let the law handle it."

INCIDENT AT PUEBLO

by AL STORM

YELLOW mid-morning sunlight slanted across the roofs on the east side of the street and flooded the hotel gallery, which was on the west. In the bright light the man's tallness was exaggerated, as was his leanness. The dark of recent anger was still in his narrow face. His eyes were colorless and utterly wild, twitching restlessly now from object to object along the street. And at his thigh, belted low, the barrel not yet cooled, was the gun that had killed Furnas Shuck.

Thomas Benbow came up behind Rose Ann Mazour as she stood staring, hatred slipping from him in cold vicious whisper. "That's him, damn him, the tall one!"

Rose Ann did not comment. He had killed a man, and now he stood on the gallery of the Fennelmann House, with all the basin cattlemen gathering protectively around him. The sun was hot, and the town utterly without sound. What was there to say?

Thomas Benbow grasped Rose Ann's arm, tugging her about, bringing his face close. "Get over to Mrs. Turnbull's with the other

THIS KILLING was men's work, Rose Ann was told . . . and it was her job to cheer them on, even when she knew they were wrong

women, Rose Ann," he said. His eyes were narrowed and hot. He refused to look toward the hotel. "This isn't over yet."

"I still have some shopping to do," Rose Ann protested.

"It'll wait."

Furnas Shuck had come from Benbow's region of Illinois; last year he had farmed to Benbow's east, using Benbow's implements. Remembering this, Rose Ann allowed herself to be turned.

"Who is he? I know he's a cattleman, but—"

"Andrews, Bert Andrews." Benbow's voice was low, and utterly hating—Benbow, who normally was so mildly gentle even profane language was unusual for him.

Rose Ann slid a glance past his shoulder, scanning the Fennelmann House. She did not know what she expected to find that was not there, or what was there that she had not expected, but something unsettled her. The cattlemen looked so assured, so darkly dangerous. She caught the wink of reflection from brass cartridges in their belts, the grim dark steel of their revolvers.

"Don't force it, Tom," she said suddenly, urgently. "Get the sheriff."

"He's been sent for," Benbow said without relish. "But which side's he on? What'll he do?"

It was question the answer to which no settler knew. The law had opened the land, and had brought them here; but in this basin the law was untried, unproven. Defiance in small things had led inexorably to defiance in bigger things. Threats and wild talk had evolved into fist fights, stock hazings, brutal beatings, and now finally the ultimate violence, killing.

"Where's Marshal Pebbles?" she said. "Let him handle it."

Benbow shrugged. "He's home with a broken leg." His manner made plain that he was humoring her, and desperation filled Rose Ann.

"You can't fight them like this!" she cried. "Once you start killing it'll never end. Let the law take care of them."

Thomas Benbow looked straight ahead, not answering. His mouth was clamped, and his stride lengthened until Rose Ann was forced to trot to remain abreast of him. Then they were at the corner, where a high frame building stood three feet farther forward than the rest of the buildings. Three of its upper windows were broken.

"Andrews watched you all the time, Tom, but he didn't make any move to stop you."

Two farmers had been standing close to the building's edge, the clapboard wall hiding them from the hotel gallery. Both carried rifles. Now they stepped back, wary and somehow eager, as though this violence that was about to break loose was already intoxicating them. An hour ago she would have called them neighbors; now Rose Ann found them strangely unfamiliar.

"You go to Mrs. Turnbull's," Thomas Benbow directed, not looking at her. "Stay there. This is man's work." He extended his hand. One of the men laid a rifle in it, and Benbow turned then, looking directly at Rose Ann. "The time to patch a dam is when the first leak starts."

ON THE hotel gallery, Bert Andrews rolled a brown paper cigarette and thrust it into the corner of his mouth. He struck a light, drawing deeply of the bitter smoke.

"The farmers are on both corners," Tonsel said quietly, not quite as unconcerned as he wanted to sound. "Jepperling and Rufe Hoyt will bring horses around in back."

"That's watched, too," Bert said. "They're not fools."

He drew on the cigarette and stood in the sunlight, with a slow plume of grayish smoke lifting before his eyes. He hadn't meant to kill the nester, hadn't even meant to fight, for that matter. But they'd brushed shoulders, tempers had flared, and suddenly he'd had no choice.

"You've got to get out of town, Bert." This time it was Lichety speaking, and Carl Lichety was one of the older fighters of the basin.

A bitter humor touched Bert's mouth. "You think they'd let me go?"

Lichety flared testily, "Who's asking them? If we let them think they have us worried, we'll have to fight them from now on. Stomp over 'em, and next time they'll get out of the way!"

Bert Andrews flicked the cigarette away, arching it high so that it cleared the gallery edge, the plank walk, and the gutter. "There are twelve or fifteen farm families in town," he said.

"Does that worry you?" Lichety was wickedly sardonic. He had been in the basin the longest, and claimed the most. That farmers could come in now and legally plow under his land was a bitter pill he could not swallow. "We'll leave in a bunch," he said, "all of us together. And the first man that tries to stop us will get killed."

Bert knew, as did Lichety, that the settlers would try to stop them. He turned, looking along a street that had gone dead and lifeless, with only an occasional person flitting furtively across a doorway or behind a window." A thin wink of light caught his attention, and he shifted in time to see a rifle muzzle edge slowly around one corner of Buckner's hardware store, sixty yards down the street.

"Inside, everybody, quick!" Carl Lichety yelled. "They want fight, those damned grass spoilers. Let's give them fight!"

"No!" Bert Andrews yelled, and saw angry contempt boil up in Lichety's face. "Don't give them an excuse to start something."

A dragging heaviness slowed Rose Ann Mazour's steps. She had moved away from Thomas Benbow and the corner where the other two men waited. But she had not moved far enough, and she knew she never could. They were one, all the farmers, and this holocaust Benbow's anger was about to let loose would sweep down upon them all.

She wheeled then, thinking of going back. A man she knew only vaguely as Mr. Perkins strode from behind a small shed. He carried a shotgun across his arm, and was whisky-flushed of face. He was a newcomer to the basin. At sight of her, he stopped.

"Have you seen my father?" Rose Ann queried.

Perkins looked uncertainly at her.

"Claud Mazour," she reminded him.

Perkins shook his head, not certain that he knew her, or that his presence was not conducive to trouble of some sort. "You go home, lady, and get in your house and lock the door," he said suddenly, grimly. "We don't want any women hurt."

"You fool! Do you think a woman must be *hit* by a bullet to be hurt by one?"

Perkins shook his head, not comprehending. "Go back home," he said. "Go back."

A rifle shot sounded, lone and sharply portentous in the stifling heat. Perkins stared at her, his mouth working. Then he wheeled and began sprinting down the street. A fragrant sickish-sweet odor of whisky floated from him.

The women were gathered at Mrs. Turnbull's, and they were frightened. Rose Ann paused at the gate, seeing them grouped on the tiny floorless gallery. After one glimpse of their strained faces and haunted eyes, Rose Ann knew that she could not remain here.

One of the older women came toward her. "Did you hear that shot? Do you think—"

"I don't know," Rose Ann answered truthfully. "You're worried. Why don't you get your man and go home?"

The woman stared at her. Another one, Mrs. Purvis, overheard and turned. She said fiercely, "We can't let them get away with murder. If we do it once, things will come to a point where we even won't be safe in our beds!"

"How safe are you going to be if your man gets shot, Rose Ann said brutally, "when *they* come seeking revenge for *their* dead?"

A shocked quiet fell over the group. Women stared at her with hatred, with horror. Pretty young Mizzue Collins began crying softly, covering her mouth with both hands.

BERT ANDREWS sat on the gallery completely alone now. Behind him, the door was propped wide so that he could fling himself inside if necessity demanded it. But, when that necessity came, he would not be able to fling his bullet-torn body anywhere, he thought bitterly. Sweat collected under his sombrero band and itched across the wide stretch of his shoulders. He sighed and leaned back, cocking his bootheels on the railing.

"I'm going out to get my crew," Carl Lichety said suddenly, viciously, close inside the door.

Without turning his head, Bert said, "Go ahead, Carl. It's me they want, not you. If you take it easy, they probably won't object to your riding out."

Carl Lichety swore, and his bootheels made angry sounds inside the hotel, but he did not appear in the doorway. Presently his voice came in quieter, more puzzled vein.

"How long do you think this will stall them?"

Bert shook his head, not answering. Until some hothead gets impatient, he thought grimly. Until seeing me here and holding me in the sights of a rifle aren't enough. He looked down the street, to where a bay horse lay dead in the sunlight. He wondered whose strategy it was to wait until the horse was in the open, for all to see, before killing it. Whoever's idea it had been, it had worked. Jepperling had dropped his reins and fled; Rufe Hoyt had taken the hint, turned quietly around, and left town.

The farmers had gone this far in taking the law into their own hands. How long, Bert wondered, would it be before they would go the rest of the way?

Three blocks to the south and two blocks east, Rose Ann Mazour was experiencing the same tension and fear as Andrew felt. She pounded against the warped edge of the rusted screen door. When she heard the stirring inside, she called. A tall lanky woman in a soiled dress and unkempt shoes stood looking at her.

"Mrs. Pebbles?"

The woman nodded.

"I've got to see your husband! There's trouble."

The woman's face stirred and grew angry. "He's flat on his back," she said accusingly. "For a long time Hank kept a good town and had no trouble. And now when he's down and can't help himself—"

"Woman, who is it?" a man's voice called crankily from the hot gloom inside the house.

"It's a settler, Hank."

Startled quiet held the room for a second. There was a clattering of furniture and a muffled snarling cursing. Hank Pebbles' wife cried out. Then Hank Pebbles stood leaning heavily against a door frame, one hand braced hard against a chair, his legs wrapped tight and held stiffly out of balance.

His hair was wild, he hadn't shaved, tiny red meshes of angry veins completely filled each eye. "Get me a gun, Martha!" he cried. "Get me a horse." He lifted his hand from the chair back, swayed, and fell thunderously backward out of sight.

Mrs. Pebbles cried out and ran hurriedly toward him. From the street beyond, a shot echoed forlornly and dwindled away.

"What the hell is this?" Carl Lichety snarled from the shadows inside the hotel. "How long is this going to go on?"

"It's the old Indian game of nerves," Bert Andrews answered tightly. "You should know that, Carl. If I make a move, they plaster me for running; if I try firing back, they'll shoot me and call it self-defense."

A long bullet gouge was lifted from the extreme edge of the railing. Bert looked at it, his mouth dry. Somewhere at one of the upper windows a whisper rasped suddenly.

"I can see one of those sodbusters in back of Floyd's. I can get him with a 30-30."

"You might as well put it into me as into him," Bert called quickly. "It'll have the same effect—getting me killed."

"Then damn it," Lichety snarled, "come inside, Andrews! We're not going to keep hunkering down here like pussy cats too scared to claw!"

"The first move I make, they'll shoot me," Bert Andrews said. "You know that. The only thing holding them back now is that they think they have lots of time, as long as I sit out here where they can study me. And besides, I don't think they're anxious to be the ones to start the ball rolling."

"Well, I'm anxious, by heaven!" Lichety said.

AT THE corner where Buckner had his hardware store, Thomas Benbow sighted carefuly along a rifle and squeezed gently on the trigger. At the last possible moment he slacked off. The bead rested unerringly on the cattleman's chest, just above his boot toes, where they perched on the railing. Benbow aimed and squeezed a dozen time before, each time slackening off at the last possible fraction before firing. It was a deadly, tantalizing game; sooner or later he'd miscalculate and would fire, and he knew it.

Damn that cattleman! Why didn't he flinch? Why didn't he leap up and try fleeing, and give a man an excuse for plugging

him? Why didn't he yank his gun? He'd been plenty quick to yank it against Furnas Shuck! Something held Benbow from deliberately shooting the man, much as he wanted to.

"You there, by that corner, drop that rifle!"

The command was so brusque, so dead certain, Benbow stood for an instant not quite certain that he was hearing right. Then he wheeled, and his eyes bulged.

A lean, sick-looking man sat tensely astride a ricketing wheelbarrow. A blanket-padded, splinted leg was braced before him; on his shirt a badge picked up rays of dazzling sunlight. At the wheelbarrow handles, flushed with strain, Rose Ann Mazour and a tall lanky woman leaned against the load.

"I'm the law here, you know that," Hank Pebbles said fretfully. "If you start anything, you're outside the law automatically. Do you want that?"

Benbow blinked, looking from Pebbles to the women. Abruptly he remembered, and his fingers gripped the rifle. "That cattleman, Bert Andrews, killed Furnas Shuck."

"We'll have a hearing," Hank Pebbles said, "as soon as the sheriff gets here." He stared into Thomas Benbow's face until Benbow licked his lips and shifted his grip on the rifle. Then he twisted irritably. "All right, come on! Get me to that hotel before those other men cut loose."

"No, Rose Ann!" Benbow shouted suddenly. "Don't!"

Rose Ann struggled with the handle, throwing her weight against it to get the heavy wheelbarrow moving. She felt as if there were no skin left on her palms at all, and her lungs were wheezing until each breath seemed to contrive its own particular torture. But she'd managed to get Pebbles out of his house, and that was the main thing. She had brought the law out in the open, where no one could forget or ignore it. If the cattlemen defied him now, the sheriff would be forced to take action.

The street was hot, and as endless as a dry creek between the banked silent cliffs of the buildings. Rose Ann saw the dark figure on the hotel porch rise incredulously to his feet and stand staring. She saw him half turn, obviously saying something to someone inside the hotel.

"Bert!" Pebbles yelled irritably. "Get down here! Do you want these fool women killing themselves wheeling me in this heat?"

For a long time Bert stood unmoving. Then he stirred slowly. His glance shifted from the wheelbarrow and probed, one way and then the other along the street. Finally he came down the hotel steps.

He was as tall as Rose Ann had thought, and as lean. As he drew nearer, he recognized Mrs. Pebbles and removed his hat; but he did not know Rose Ann. A small, respectful perplexity touched his eyes as he regarded her.

"There are nesters in all these buildings, centering shotguns on you," Pebbles said.

"There are a few guns over at the hotel that aren't exactly rusted shut," Bert Andrews answered quietly. He kept looking at Rose Ann, trying to figure her position.

"She's a nester woman," Pebbles explained finally, crankily. "Of the whole blinking lot of you, she's the only one with sense enough to come to the law to settle this thing."

Bert Andrews's face showed surprise. "Better call off your dogs," he said softly, speaking to Rose Ann. "They're working themselves up to try killing me."

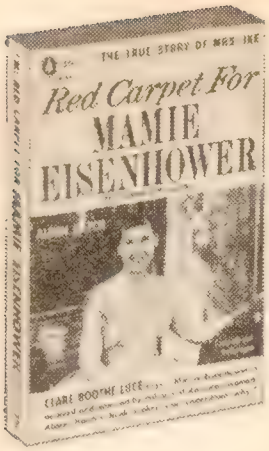
"Like you killed Furnas Shuck?"

For a moment the look of anger came back across his face. He struggled with it, and then, abruptly he laughed. "If they give me the same chance I gave him, I'll have no complaint," he said.

Hank Pebbles looked from Bert to Rose Ann as they stared into each other's eyes. He turned swiftly, and nodded to his wife.

"All right!" he bellowed suddenly. "Get me into the shade somewhere before I fry in this blasted sun. It looks as if we're going to wait for the sheriff to decide this thing."

Rose Ann reached for the handle of the wheelbarrow, but Bert Andrews was already there. She walked beside him as he wheeled Pebbles along the street toward a patch of shade. There, together, they would wait for the sheriff.



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OUT OF THE CHUTES

ONCE in a while we get a letter from a reader asking how a guy (or a gal) goes about getting into rodeo. The oversimplified answer is that first you learn how to ride a bronc or rope a calf, and next you go to a rodeo, pay your entry fee, and compete.

The hitch, of course, comes in the learning part. To give you some idea of how tough that is, we're going to quote from a letter signed A. Greenhorn, of Pasadena, Calif., which appeared in a recent issue of *Rodeo Sports News*.

Mrs. Greenhorn and her husband took a young friend, Muffet, to her first rodeo, and Muffet wanted to learn how to rope.

"I bought forty feet of rope to practice with, and we went out to try our luck. Muffet took the coil of rope in one hand and, pointing to the dangling end, said, 'I hold this end in my teeth, don't I?'

"She had the rope confused with the pigging string, of course. I was tempted not to tell her the truth, but was afraid she might have beginner's luck and really rope something, and I'd be stuck with a dental bill.

"Several thousand throws and a very sore arm later, she had managed to rope a garbage pail at least three feet away. She hasn't given up, though."

Before they try to rope anything alive, though, Mrs. Greenhorn wants to be sure their equipment is up to par. In fact, she is willing to trade a dirty rope for some information. She says she remembers seeing cowboys stretching their ropes and rubbing something on them, but she doesn't know what it is.

"When I got our rope," she says, "we stretched it for a while between our car and a tree, and then gave it a thorough rubdown with beeswax. It's pretty warm here, and the beeswax got sticky and wouldn't slide very well. So we took it to the garden and spent another thirty minutes rubbing dirt on it. That did help the stickiness, but the rope is still inclined to kink. Maybe we put the wrong stuff on it, or maybe it's just the wrong kind of rope. Do you know anyone who'd like to set us straight on these questions, in return for which we will send him forty feet of the waxiest, dirtiest cotton window-sash rope you'll ever see?"

In another issue of *Rodeo Sports News* there are more non-professional comments about roping from the Editor, Gene Lamb. He has been studying the event from the point of view of efficiency, and has decided something must be done. This is how Gene sees it.

"Here comes the roper. He ropes the calf from the right side, jumps off on the left, and scampers down the rope. He grabs the calf by a foot and flings him down, then has to hang onto the calf and hop around spraddle-legged until he gets on the other side. He'd save time if he were already on the other side.

"Also, the roper always seems to get the calf on his left side and start tying the right front foot. What if the calf goes down on his left side? Then the roper has to flip him over—more lost time."

Gene admits that he is hardlly in a position to be critical, since he has never roped any calves. "However," he continues, "I have recently acquired a wooden practice calf. As soon as I perfect my method I am going to call it the 'Lamb Non-Flip-Over, Start-On-the-Other-Side, Calf-Roping System,' and go into business."

Frankly, we don't expect to hear much more of the Lamb NFO, SOTOS Calf-Roping System, but we've been wrong before. And if it takes the rodeo world by storm, we'll be sure to let you know.

Adios,

THE EDITORS

EMIGRANT'S GIRL

a story by

J. L. BOUMA

JOY WOULD MAKE sensible Ben Dodd a very bad wife . . . but still he couldn't bear the thought that another man might win her

WHEN the fading sun shone ruddy on Beaver Creek, Ben Dodd finished his plowing and looked over his fields with a smile of contentment. His curly black hair lay sweat-wetted on his bronzed forehead and his lanky body rested gratefully against the plow handles. Then, as he gazed at his log cabin, his eyes sobered and his mouth went slack. He sighed with a kind of despair and reminded himself that life in Oregon wasn't as rosy as it could be.

"Ben Dodd," he told himself firmly, "you have to get yourself a wife. It's not right for a man to fix his own food, or to do his own washing and mending. Find yourself a strong woman to keep house for you, one who'll help in the fields if need be. You've been putting it off, man, and now that you've finished plowing there's time to get the chore done."

It was easy enough said, there being no one to hear. But to find the kind of woman he had in mind might take a heap of looking. He was acquainted with just about every settler from the Dalles to Portland, and offhand he could think of no likely prospects. A man had to be careful when he picked a woman to share his life—as careful as he had been in picking his oxen for the treck across the plains. Ben's had never faltered during their westwart march, while lesser animals had weakened and died along the trail.

"Remember that, Ben," he warned himself.

"Get yourself a strong woman who won't break down and cause you grief, and you'll have your problem licked."

Then he grew annoyed with himself for talking out loud. It was a bad habit, and just went to show that he'd been alone for too long a time. It would be nice to have a woman to talk to, he thought, as long as she didn't carry on like a hen hatching. It would be nice if she were good to look at, too, as long as she minded her manners. Having a pretty face around the house was one thing, but a giddy female was a horse of a different color.

The kind to get would be a strong, pretty woman who only talked when she was spoken to, one who did as she was told without complaint. That wasn't too much to ask, if the man was a good provider who could keep a wife in reasonable comfort.

He ran the plow to the shed, unhitched, and turned the oxen loose in the pasture, thinking he might visit Hugh Bomar this evening. They had crossed the plains together, and now Hugh was Ben's nearest neighbor. He was a shiftless cuss at best, but if there were any likely-looking women around he would know about them.

Ben washed up and entered his cluttered cabin, and set about fixing a meal of fried dough and venison steak. He wasn't much good around a stove. As he chewed the leathery meat he evoked a pleasant image of his woman serving him plates of steaming delicacies—kidney pie, wild turkey and dumplings, a haunch of venison smothered in onions and mushrooms, or roasted sage hen. And deep-dish apple pie to top off the meal. Ben's mouth fairly watered at the thought.

He had finished his frugal meal when Hugh Bomar hailed the house. Hugh rode up on his mule, plucking his banjo and singing. "Listen to this," he told Ben, and hit a spray of notes that sounded like water falling in a pool. "And this," he said, and the handful of chords he struck were sweet as cider in the sunlight. "Isn't that nice?"

Ben admitted that it was. Hugh slid from the mule's bare back, stretched his arms, and yawned, all six feet four of him. "I see you got your plowing done," he said. "I've been lazing all day, trying to make up my mind to get started on my land. I expect I'll plant some spuds and a corner of corn. Don't know yet for sure."

"What brings you calling?" Ben asked, thinking he'd best ease into the subject of women carefully.

"Ezra stopped by on his way to Portland this morning. A new family by the name of Erling settled along the Badger, so we're all getting together for a cabin raising tomorrow."

"A big family?" Ben asked.

"Four girls and a couple of boys, so Ezra claims. One of the girls is a cousin." Hugh grinned. "Being in a sparking mood, I aim to charm 'em with my banjo. Stop by early and we'll ride out together."

Ben said he would. After Hugh had strummed his way out of hearing, Ben smoked a pipe and thought it was sure a coincidence, his thinking of getting himself a woman and then Hugh showing up with the news that a family full of 'em had moved in on Badger Creek.

Four to pick from! But he'd have to hustle if he meant to outshine the rest of the bachelors who would show up to help Erling build his cabin.

"All right then, Ben," he told himself, "this is your chance, so make the most of it. Better get your clothes ready. You want to look as spruce as the next man when you meet Erling's daughters."

He set about hunting his best shirt. He never could find anything in this cabin, but finally he found it hanging from a nail under his slicker. It was white, with a pleated front, but dirty as sin and with three buttons missing.

Ben put water to boil, found needle and thread and extra buttons, and went right to work.

It took him five minutes and a big slice of his temper to thread the needle. He sewed the buttons on finally, and then sponged his lone suit of clothes. He poured hot water in the tub and put the shirt to soak, hating every minute of it.

Hell and high water! It beat all that a man who could farm with the best of them did so poorly at housework.

"Woman's work is what it is," he grumbled. "And I mean to latch on to one of Erling's daughters tomorrow, or bust trying!"

HE HAD calmed down by the time he and Hugh reached the meadow above Badger Creek next morning. A quick-acting man could make a mistake he'd rue the rest of his days. There'll be no pig in a poke for me, Ben thought. It's better to be single and to eat my own food, than married and miserable and eat like a king.

They weren't the first by a long shot. A great many people were hustling around doing this and that. Women were setting out cakes and pies and baskets of fried chicken and fruit. There was a shoat in a pit, and golden loaves of bread on a table. Two men were digging a cellar in the center of the staked cabin site, while others cleared brush. The steady sound of axes biting into wood came from the belt of pines that surrounded the meadow. The happy screams of children at play rang out over the gathering.

Sam Erling came forward to greet them as they picketed their mounts on the ample grass. He was a stocky man in homespun with a spade beard, and his shrewd eyes measured Ben carefully before they settled on Hugh. He smiled, then, a pleased smile, and walked clean around Hugh and thumped the tall man's enormous shoulders.

"You're the biggest one I've seen in a coon's age. A bear for work, I'm thinking." He beamed at Ben. "You aren't as big, but I'm thinking you could wear the average man to a frazzle. Tell me, now, are you boys married?"

"Not as I know of," Hugh said, and grinned. Ben shook his head.

"Well," Erling said, and stroked his beard. "Well," he repeated, looking smug as a woman who's won the cake-baking contest. "You have your own claims, I reckon?"

"We're located along the Beaver," Ben said.

"You're not married and you have your own claims," Erling said, as though talking to himself. He cleared his throat like a man who meant to see that things got done. "I reckon you boys have come here to work as well as eat and flirt with the women."

"Pa!"

The breathless voice brought Ben around cautiously. The girl ran up like a colt scampering, and stopped with a rustle of green calico skirts. Coquettish eyes darted from Ben to Hugh to Erling.

The breathless voice said, "Pa, we'd better haul those rocks for the fireplace from the creek before they cut and notch all the logs."

"Why, now, I reckon Hugh and Ben here can tend to that." Erling made a little flourish. "Boys, meet my daughter, Joy."

Sam Erling stepped back, stroking his beard, and watched them with his shrewd gaze as the girl lowered her lashes demurely and made a small curtsy. She had gold-flecked eyes, like aspen leaves in the fall. She was slender, with a definite roundness in the right places. Her hair was like the breast of a red robin, and her lips were like ready-to-burst berries. About eighteen, Ben guessed. He couldn't recall a time when just looking at a girl gave him so much pleasure. He scarcely noticed that Hugh stood slack-jawed beside him, or that another girl had joined them, until Mr. Erling introduced her.

"Boys, this is my niece, Hilda Smythe. She made the trek across the plains with us."

Ben pulled his eyes from Joy reluctantly. Hilda was a big, strapping girl. She was tall, full-breasted, and ample hipped. Her flaxen hair was braided and coiled, her cheeks were like ripe apples. She had a rosebud mouth, and eyes like those of a painted doll he'd seen one time in St. Louis. She blinked her lashes and covered her mouth to stifle a giggle. Ben's gaze returned to Joy.

She looked back at him prissy-lipped and tossed her head.

"If you boys mean to work instead of laze, you'd better shuck out of your coats. The stone sled is hitched over yonder, and the creek is full of rocks." Her gaze went to the banjo strapped across Hugh's broad back, and she added sweetly, "It'll please me to take charge of your music box, Hugh. I reckon you must be a fair hand at strumming a lively tune."

"I've never had to take a back seat," Hugh admitted modestly, and handed her the banjo. "Hoedown or sweet ballads, I can sure make 'er talk."

The big lout's putting on a show, Ben thought, and she's acting like butter's melting in her mouth, bossy one minute and sweet as pie the next. I'd better steer clear of her until I get a look at her sisters.

THEY commenced work right away, while the girls sat on the grassy bank and watched. Stripped of their shoes and socks, their trousers rolled to the knees, Ben and Hugh ducked their arms under and tossed rocks on the bank. Knowing Hugh was naturally lazy, Ben figured to outshine his tall friend, but he was wrong. Hugh worked like a demon, a wild shine in his eyes. He tossed small boulders on the bank as though they were pebbles, his gaze fastened on the girls.

"My farm is along the Beaver!" he shouted, and wrenched another boulder from the mud. "I figure to raise the best crop of wheat in the country this year. I have four hogs and the snuggest cabin you ever did see."

Dang bragger, Ben thought. Hugh had never raised any crops but what he needed for himself. He was so dang lazy he hated to get up to eat.

Not to be outdone, Ben called, "I finished plowing my section last evening, and I'll be planting next week."

"I'm a mite late with my plowing," Hugh shouted. "I've been so busy with other chores, but I mean to get at it in the morning!"

"I heard you had a couple of sisters," Ben said to Joy. She smiled at him for the first time, and he felt shaken.

"Two, Mr. Dodd," she answered with sly devilment. "Agnes is eight and Ruth is ten."

Ben felt crestfallen. Hilda took the banjo from Joy and commenced to strum it in a way that made Hugh pull a sour-apple face. But when the girls finally wandered away, he looked after them with a gusty sigh and said, "Isn't she something? The prettiest filly I ever set eyes on."

"Can she cook?" Ben answered gloomily. "Can she sew and keep a man happy?"

"I'm not worried about that," Hugh said, and went after another boulder. "Let's get working. We have to get that cabin above ground!"

They worked all morning hauling rocks; they mixed mud and straw for mortar, and let a knowing man take over the job of building the fireplace. More settlers arrived by the hour. Trees were felled, cut to length, and notched. Stumpy logs were split for roof shingles, other stumps split down the middle and pounded into the earth to make the puncheon floor.

By late afternoon Ben was very tired, but it was a good tiredness; to know that they were all working with one goal in mind gave him a fine feeling. Now and then he caught a glimpse of Joy. Once she gave him a distant smile, but twice it seemed she looked right through him. She was a flirty teaser for sure, Ben told himself. She had half a dozen of the young bloods glowing. Marriage probably wouldn't change her, either. A man'd be better off to shy clear of her kind.

It was dusk when they finished the cabin. Erling nailed a horse shoe above the door, and then made a little speech to show he was grateful. Houser, a preacher of sorts, blessed the cabin and all present, and had the women sniffling into their handkerchiefs. Then there was a sudden outburst of talk and laughter, as everyone turned to the groaning tables. Wagons were hauled up in a half circle and lanterns hung from the bows, making the yard bright as day. And the talk went around.

So did Ben. He heaped his plate with this and that and stuffed himself with better vittles than he'd had in many a month. Joy and Hilda were the center of a dozen men, and Hugh was there eating and strumming his banjo, building himself to the hoedown to follow.

Ben let them be. He wasn't a man to make a fool of himself by acting like a rooster. It would be time enough to spark the girl when the dancing started. He could tell her, then, where he stood, and what he expected. But none of this hee-haw foolishness for Ben Dodd. Even so, he had trouble keeping his eyes away from her. And he couldn't help but resent the way Hugh was making himself the center of attention.

Some of the younger folk, having eaten their fill, started calling for music. An oldster appeared with his fiddle and started a tune, and a red-faced man hooted into a jug, keeping time. Then Hugh rose and came strumming, and the ball was on.

There was an old-fashioned quadrille to begin with, as a warm-up; then a schottische, followed by a two-step, and then a waltz for a breather and to make the older folk happy. Ben didn't have a chance at Joy to begin with; all the other young bucks were ahead of him.

But he did get hold of Hilda for the waltz, and he knew he had an armful.

All in a flash it hit him that Hilda was the kind of woman he'd had in mind as a wife. But when he glimpsed Joy's laughing face close by, the thought went out of his head. So when the waltz ended he was right there to ask her for the next turn. As she nodded demurely, Ben saw Hugh breaking through the crowd around them. So he took hold of Joy as soon as the fiddle began to scrape, leaving Hugh to take Hilda as a partner. This one was a slow fiddle waltz, Ben cleared his throat, meaning to make the best of this moment, but not knowing quite how to start. "It's hot," he said finally. "I'd be cool at the creek, I reckon."

JOY agreed that it would be. She was so light in his arms that it seemed at times she wasn't there, and yet her nearness made Ben a little dizzy. When they got to the creek, he kept silent so long that she offered, a little shyly he thought, "Pa tells me you're a single man, Mr. Dodd."

Ben took a long breath. "Sure enough. I've been thinking of getting married, though."

"You've found no one?" Her voice was as throaty as the rippling sound of the creek.

"Haven't really looked," Ben said, scuffing grass with his foot. "I've just been thinking, that's all. A man wants a woman who can cook and mend, and maybe help out in the fields if need be." He swallowed. "After a time there'd be kids, and a man'd want his woman to know enough to teach 'em reading and writing and how to behave properly." Ben took another long breath. "Then, he wouldn't want her to gad about or be flighty, or too outspoken."

There was more he meant to add, but what it was slipped his mind. He felt his heart pound, waiting for her comment.

She said in the softest way, "And would you need to love this woman, Mr. Dodd?"

Ben felt his face flame. Never having been in love, he hadn't considered that angle. He said stiffly, "I reckon I'd have to think kindly of her. It's wouldn't be much of a life for either of us if I didn't."

"And how should this woman feel about you?" There was an edge to her voice.

"Why, now, I'd expect her—" Ben cleared his throat— "to look up to me, as would be proper."

Joy was silent a moment, gazing across the ebony flow of the creek. Then, abruptly, she said, "Would you like to come to supper tomorrow evening, Mr. Dodd?"

Ben's heart pounded crazily. "I sure would!"

"Then we'll be expecting you. Now shall we go back and finish our dance?"

It was near dawn before the festivities ceased. Ben and Hugh rode home together as mist rose from the dewy fields. They were both strangely silent, and now and then they grinned awkwardly at each other. Ben said nothing about having been invited to supper, for he had no wish to hurt Hugh's feelings.

They said, "See you," to each other when they parted on the trail, and Ben rode on, thinking that tonight he'd know if Joy could cook or was one of those women who tossed things in a pot, and the devil take the hindmost.

He got an early start that afternoon. He had slept a few hours and had spent the rest

of the time sprucing up, and he felt ready to make his conquest. Skirting the edge of Hugh's quarter section, he was surprised to find that his tall friend had broken a sizeable piece of land since morning.

"Poor Hugh wasn't fooling when he told Joy he was going to start his plowing," Ben said. "Well, nothing's been wasted, anyhow. But he's bound to feel bad when he learns that he's going to come out second best."

Still, it went to show that Hugh had been smitten by Joy. Otherwise he would never have done all that work. It was a sad state of affairs. Ben felt deeply for his friend, but there was nothing he could do about it. It wasn't until he heard the banjo strumming from inside Erling's new cabin as he rode up that he knew he'd been a fool.

Ben wasn't the only one to be surprised. When he stepped through the door, Hugh stopped his strumming and swallowed twice, before his mouth turned sulky.

It didn't last, though. No man could stay down in the mouth and keep from bursting with pure admiration at the feast Joy and Hilda spread out on the table. Erling was a beaming host. He had sent the rest of his children to bed, he said, as he served Ben and Hugh each a glass of corn whisky.

"Wet your whistles, boy. Then fall to!"

They did. There was pork roast done to a turn, corn, snap beans, and mashed potatoes as fluffy as cream. Hugh made little groaning noises as he ate, like a man who'd been starved half his life.

Erling laughed and said, "Eat hearty, boy! Here, have some more meat and potatoes. There's plenty more in the kitchen."

Remembering how Erling had appraised Hugh when they met yesterday, and the way he was sweetening him up now, Ben had a sneaking hunch that Erling had a son-in-law in mind. Then he noticed that Erling wasn't the only one who favored Hugh; Joy couldn't keep her eyes off him long enough to spare Ben a smile.

They're both putting on a show, Ben thought uneasily. He's making out that he's never had it better, and she's being a shameless flirt. Ben Dodd, you'd better play it smart. Don't you make a fool of yourself by trying to outbow and outscrape him. Look at Joy twisting him around her little finger! If you give her the idea she can do that to you, you're done for.

The only thing to do, he decided, was to play it her way. So during the rest of the meal he showed off to Hilda. After a dessert of baked apples smothered in thick cream, he leaned back and said, "Are you spoken for, Miss Smythe?"

"No," Hilda said, giggling.

"Now that's hard to believe," Ben said seriously, for he felt on solid ground with Hilda. "You'd think that a woman who can set out a meal like this would have been spoken for long ago."

Erling agreed heartily and with enthusiasm, and Hilda blushed and said, "You please me by saying so, Mr. Dodd."

Ben was taken aback. He'd edged into it slyly, certain that Joy would take at least part credit for the meal, and he'd been wrong. "You cooked the whole meal by yourself?" he asked.

"She certainly did," Joy said, and puckered her lips at Ben. "But if you'll come to supper tomorrow evening you can have the pleasure of tasting my cooking, Mr. Dodd. You come too, Hugh," she added sweetly. "And bring your banjo."

Erling threw an uneasy glance at his daughter, cleared his throat, and said with forced heartiness, "Well, shall we have a little music before we call it an evening?"

"Not tonight, if you don't mind, Mr. Erling." Hugh was scowling at Ben as he spoke. "I have to get an early start on my plowing."

THEY left in silence, and rode back to Beaver Creek in silence. When they came to the parting in the trail, Hugh growled, "You think you're mighty smart, getting yourself invited again, don't you? Mighty dang smart, sniffing around like a puppy at the hem of her skirt and licking her hand."

"I'm a dang sight smarter than you, making out to be a hound dog baying at the moon."

"You be careful what you say."

"The same goes for you."

They strained toward each other in the darkness like two dogs on a leash. Then Hugh growled, "I have better things to do than talk to the likes of you," and rode away.

Ben rode home, raging. He was so mad that he spent the rest of the night cleaning and scrubbing his cabin. Then he went to bed and fell into a troubled sleep, knowing he'd never hated a man the way he hated Hugh Bomar.

Ben got an even earlier start the following afternoon than he had the previous day. He had in mind a long talk with Joy, before Hugh showed up. So he felt as scratchy as a she-bear and ready to do battle when he met Hugh on the trail.

Silently, as though by common agreement, both men swung down and began to circle each other like two wolves over a winter kill. Hugh's face had a rough-edged look to it, and his eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep. He growled deep in his chest as Ben charged him. At the last instant he stepped aside and shouted, "It's not fair! I could whip you to a frazzle!"

"You're welcome to start trying!"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Hugh raged. "You'd like it just fine if I hit you, so that little girl would turn against me. Well, I'm not going to fight you—not now, anyhow. She can pick and chose between us, and after that I'll be eager to show you who's the better man. But I'm not going to bloody you and have you weeping and wailing around her like a puppy."

Ben took a gusty breath and calmed his temper. "Hugh Bomar," he said evenly, "you have a double whipping coming to you. If I can't make it stick the first time, I'll keep trying if I have to hunt you and fight you every blessed day in the week." He climbed on his horse and continued along the trail.

The encounter had somewhat dampened Ben's appetite, even though he'd eaten little, in order to make the most of Joy's cooking. But after a slug of Erling's corn whisky he began to feel better, and Joy's dazzling smile as she passed the kitchen door had him sitting up straight in his chair.

He had to admit that she touched him in a way Hilda never could. Still, Hilda was a smart cook, and a man could do worse, a lot worse. Hilda came in just then lugging a load of firewood that would have tried Ben's strength. Now there was a woman for you! She'd work like a horse and laugh about it. She wasn't bad to look at, either.

Joy came in with a big platter of steaks. She put it down and hitched around some at her dress, and Ben saw that the skirt had been torn and sewed up raggedly, so that it was all bunched together. Joy noticed his look.

"I tore it last night when I was taking it off," she said, pouting her lips. "I guess I should have ironed another dress today, but I was just feeling too lazy, so I sewed the torn place instead."

Ben opened his mouth and then closed it again, as she smiled at him and returned to the kitchen. He wished she hadn't smiled. That smile of hers made a man forget things he should be thinking of, made him make little of what should be important—like being lazy, and not able to sew a stitch. It was a poor thought to be nursing at a time like this.

Finally Erling rose, and his gaze moved gloomily over the table. His voice was lifeless. "Well, we might as well fall to." He forced it out.

They drew up their chairs. Joy said gaily, "I hope you all enjoy my cooking. You especially, Mr. Dodd."

"I don't know why I shouldn't," Ben said, but he learned the reason soon enough.

The venison steaks were tough as bull hide, the potatoes soggy and lumpy, the garden greens half raw. Both he and Hugh ate manfully, but Erling just picked at his food.

Joy gave Ben a doe-eyed smile when he glanced at her like a man trying to make sure he's seeing right. And all at once it went through him what life with her would be like. He'd end up doing the household chores and the farm work both, most likely. She'd laze in bed while he fixed his own breakfast, and he'd be lucky if supper was on the table when he came in from the fields. And cooking the way Joy did would sure enough take the heart out of him. No wonder Erling wanted to be rid of her. Ben had a sudden notion to get up and leave.

HE MANAGED to empty his plate, even if it did gag him. He said he'd sure enjoyed his meal, and got a sour look from Hugh for saying it. Right then and there Ben decided to switch horses in midstream, and he flashed Hilda a smile filled

with interest. She was the kind of woman he had wanted, to begin with, and from the way she giggled he guessed she was his for the taking. So what was he pestering himself about?

But even as he smiled at her he knew his heart wasn't in it, and he gave it up as a bad job. Something other than soggy potatoes and leather-tough steak lay heavy in his stomach.

Hugh, out of pure habit, strummed a handful of chords on his banjo, but they came out mournful and angry, and drew no response. Ben eased out after that, and it seemed Hugh was of the same mind. They tried to make their good nights cheery, but there was a damper on their spirits, and they shared a common urge to get away.

Shoulders slumped, they rode across the clearing. When they reached the trees, Ben looked back. He shouldn't have. For, framed in the doorway, the lamplight behind her, was Joy. And Ben knew with the suddenness of summer lightning that he couldn't live without her. As the thought struck him, she turned inside and closed the door, and Ben neck-reined his horse in a tight circle.

"Where do you think you're going?" Hugh growled.

"I'm going back to her, and you aren't going to stop me."

"You just wait," Hugh said. "Since it's as plain as the nose on your stupid face that she picked you, I have nothing to lose by hammering you to a pulp. Get down off that horse?"

Ben obliged. His first punch sent Hugh reeling. They came together like two snarling dogs, and fought like spitting wildcats. Finally Hugh's big fist almost tore Ben's head from his shoulders. As he fell back he heard Hugh roar, "I don't know why you were looking so blamed put out, anyhow! She picked you, didn't she?"

Ben groaned and felt his head. "I don't care if she can't cook."

"What's that? Hugh jerked him to his feet and jarred him up against a tree. "What's that you say? Can't cook?"

"Can't cook, can't sew—"

"Who can't cook?" Hugh roared.

"Joy, you damn fool!"

"Huh?" Hugh said weakly, and let go of Ben. "What's she got to do with it? You've been sparking Hilda. You danced six times with her the other night—I kept count. Last night you were praising her, asking if she was spoken for. And tonight—"

"I didn't even notice her!" Ben yelled. "Who'd want to be wed to that big—"

"Be careful," Hugh warned softly, "before I say something about that skinny little daughter of Erling's."

"Why, I'm damned," Ben said. "We've been fighting over the wrong girl." He went toward his horse. "Let's go back and get started on the right foot."

The girls were washing dishes when they came back to the cabin. Hugh and Hilda vanished out the back door, but Joy made Ben sit down and explain himself. He did his best speaking desperately and earnestly.

"Joy honey, I don't mind if you can't cook or sew or if you're a little lazy. It just doesn't matter. All I know is that I'm crazy about you."

"You more than just think kindly of me?" she asked, tapping her small foot.

"Joy honey, I—"

"And if I were ever so foolish as to give you my hand, could I gad about and be giddy and outspoken?"

"Just so you're you," Ben said fervently.

She smiled at him and fluffed her hair. "So you think I can't cook, is that it?"

"Joy honey, I don't care if you can't." He got up and put his arms around her. "I reckon you can learn."

"I reckon I learned how when I was no older than my sisters," Joy said. "But wouldn't I have been a fool to let you come courting if there was no love for me in your heart?"

Ben gaped. "You mean—"

"I mean that meal tonight was my idea," she answered spiritedly. "I figured if you loved me enough it wouldn't matter, and that if you didn't—"

"What then, Joy honey?"

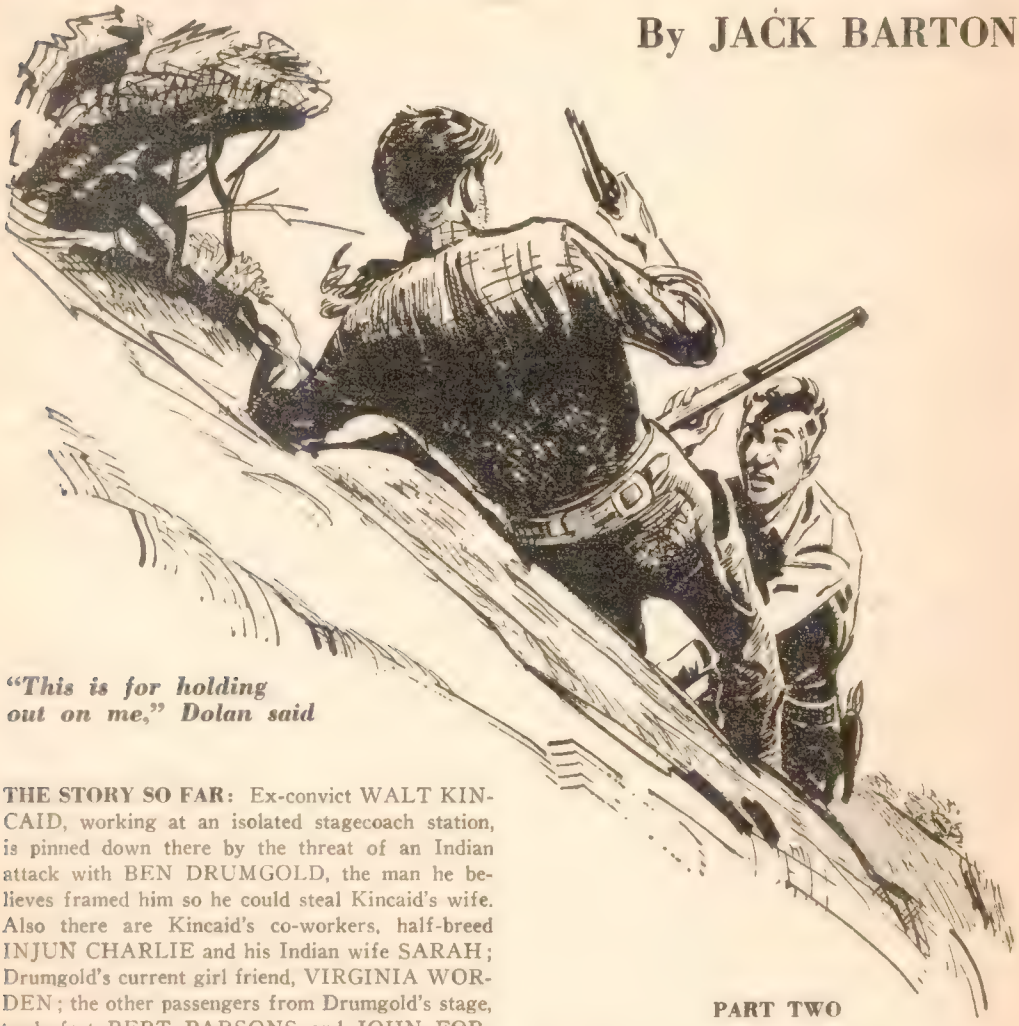
"Oh, there are other ways of catching a man," Joy said.

Just then, through the open kitchen window, they heard a gasp, followed by a giggle and a slap. Ben grinned at Joy.

"I reckon there *are* other ways," he said. "There certainly are."

AMBUSH CANYON

By JACK BARTON



"This is for holding out on me," Dolan said

THE STORY SO FAR: Ex-convict WALT KINCAID, working at an isolated stagecoach station, is pinned down there by the threat of an Indian attack with BEN DRUMGOLD, the man he believes framed him so he could steal Kincaid's wife. Also there are Kincaid's co-workers, half-breed INJUN CHARLIE and his Indian wife SARAH; Drumgold's current girl friend, VIRGINIA WORDEN; the other passengers from Drumgold's stage, tenderfeet BERT PARSONS and JOHN FORSYTHE, and dancehall girl LILY MARVIN; the stagecoach driver, HANK WEAVER; and three hardcases—CHRIS DOLAN, LEW THORPE, and SANCHEZ—who had planned to steal $30,000 Drumgold is known to be carrying. The Indians offer to let the others go if Forsythe—who has killed an unarmed Indian in a fit of panic—is surrendered for torture. The others are willing, but Kincaid and the women object. The Indians are told they cannot have Forsythe. They start the attack.

PART TWO

THEY waited, on edge. The silence continued. For all the sound the Utes made, they might have been gone from Lost Squaw Canyon. After a time the wounded drummer groaned. Then, from the opposite direction, along the wall, came Sanchez's lament.

"Isn't somebody going to help me?"

It was the first indication Kincaid had that

Sanchez was hurt. He moved along the wall, passing Injun Charlie at the gate and then coming to Sanchez, who sat flat on the ground.

He asked, "Where are you hit?"

Sanchez, swearing, said, "In my left arm. And I'm bleeding like a stuck pig."

Kincaid called to the half-breed. "Take him inside, Charlie. Have Sarah do what she can for him."

Indian Charlie said, "Sarah's gone."

"Gone? Gone where?"

"Back to her people."

"When did that happen?"

"When it got dark," Injun Charlie said. "She went over the back wall."

Kincaid stared at him, but in the darkness he could read nothing on the man's face. Anyway, it was never possible to know what he felt or thought. "You see what you can do for him, then," Kincaid said. "Old Hank and that drummer are down, too. I'll have to see to them."

He could do nothing for Hank Weaver, he discovered a minute later. The old stage driver had come to the end of the road. A Ute bullet had hit him directly between the eyes. Beyond Weaver's body, Kincaid found Bert Parsons slumped against the wall and groaning piteously. The drummer made no reply when spoken to, so Kincaid eased him to the ground, then struck a match. He extinguished the flame instantly, after a quick look at the man's wound.

There was a bad crease at Parsons' left temple. It was bleeding profusely, but the drummer seemed to be suffering more from fright than pain. Again noting the smell of whisky on the man, Kincaid felt for a bottle in his coat pockets. Finding one, he held Parsons's head back and poured some of the liquor down his throat. He waited a moment, then pulled Parsons to his feet and led him to the house. Injun Charlie and Sanchez were already there.

The half-breed said, "I'll need some light if I'm to help this man."

Kincaid said, "All right."

He eased Parsons onto a bench, then closed the door. He lit a lantern instead of the hanging lamp, and kept its wick turned low. As he set the lantern on the table, Injun Charlie took his knife and slit Sanchez's shirt sleeve so he could get at the man's wound.

Dan Macklin appeared at the doorway of the room in which he'd been abed. He was a lean, gray man of about fifty-five. His right arm was in a sling to keep its weight from pulling on his bullet-shattered shoulder. He looked tottery from shock, pain, and loss of blood, but he carried his gun rig in his left hand.

"Is it over?" he asked, "or are they still out there?"

"They're still out there," Kincaid told him. "It's far from being over."

"I'd better lend a hand."

"If you can make it, go ahead. We'll need every man who can shoot a gun."

He crossed to the door of the room occupied by Virginia and Lily, and knocked. The door was opened by Virginia. "We'll need bandages," he told her, "and hot water. The squaw is gone, so maybe you or Lily can give Charlie a hand with these wounded men. The other could make some coffee, maybe. We'll need that too."

"We'll do all we can, of course."

He nodded. "Keep the door shut and stay away from the windows," he said. "If you need water from the well, Charlie will get it. Don't have any more light than the lantern, and put it out as soon as you can. When the shooting starts again, go into the back room."

She said, "Yes," and he turned to leave the house.

Macklin was on his way out, moving slowly on wobbly legs. Kincaid closed the door after them. The night was still quiet, ominously so. The moon was high, barely seen because of the cloudy sky. He walked to the well, from where he could see Lew Thorpe at the rear wall.

"Did anything happen back there, Lew?"

"Not a thing. You know, a man might be able to make a getaway from here."

"He wouldn't get far."

Thorpe said, "I guess not," and cursed the Utes.

Kincaid went to the side of the house and called John Forsythe to the edge of the roof. The tenderfoot's face was a pale blotch.

"See anything off to the side, John?"

"No. I could have picked off some of the Indian's over in the rocks, only your orders were—"

"Pick off as many as you can when it starts up again," Kincaid said, "but duck down after each shot. They'll try to target you by the flash of your rifle. And don't forget to keep watch for a side attack. Savvy?"

Forsythe said, "I understand," and moved back from the roof's edge.

KINCAID crossed to the barn. The ladder was there, at the side; Drumgold had seen fit to keep it with him rather than to let Forsythe have it. Drumgold always looked out for himself. Kincaid climbed until he could see the cattleman, and told him, as he'd told Forsythe, how to fire on the Utes when the attack was resumed. Drumgold's face was shiny with sweat, and his breathing was labored.

"Look, Kincaid," he said, "are you sure there's no way out for us?"

"If there were a way out, we wouldn't be here."

"There's no way you and the half-breed know about by which you could get Miss Worden and the Marvin girl away?"

"No."

"Talk to the breed. He probably knows this canyon inside out."

"He probably does, but not better than the Utes do."

Drumgold was silent a moment. Then he said dully, "You know we can't let the women fall into their hands, don't you?"

"I know it."

"Either you or I has to make sure that it doesn't happen. Whoever is left when the Utes come over that wall will have to do it."

"It'll be up to you, Ben," Kincaid said. "When they come over that wall, I'll be dead. You'd better save two cartridges, or maybe three—the third one for yourself."

He descended the ladder, quite sure that he did not want to survive Ben Drumgold in this situation, which he had to admit was hopeless. He didn't want to do what the survivor would have to do..

Injun Charlie came from the house as Kincaid left the ladder. The half-breed was on his way to the well for a bucket. Kincaid met him there and said, "Charlie, we can't let the Utes take the women."

"Who can stop them?"

"Is there no way we can get them away?"

"No."

"You know this canyon, Charlie," Kincaid said. "You've been here a long time. You've been off prowling often enough since I've been here, through the canyon and outside it. Think, man. Maybe there is a way."

Injun Charlie said, "No," again, then filled his bucket and started to turn away. He faced about abruptly. "Once I climbed the canyon wall," he said, "not far from here. But that's no good."

"Why not?"

"It's a hard climb even when there's light," Injun Charlie said. "I don't know if I could do it in the dark. Anyway, nobody else could do it. Not those women. Ute women could, maybe, but not those soft white women."

"Where is this place you climbed?"

"West along the wall from here. Not far. Before you get to where the wall makes an angle, there's a crevice. Back in the crevice is a way to climb to a ledge. The ledge goes up the wall like this—" Injun Charlie set down the bucket and held his hands extended one behind the other in a tilted position to show that the ledge slanted sharply upward from the crevice. "Some places it's no wider than a man's foot. In some places there's no footing at all."

Kincaid thought about it for a moment, then said, "Look, Charlie; you take the women up. Maybe you'll make it. If you don't, well, you'll die here, anyway. None of us has a chance in this place. What do you say, Charlie?"

There was no immediate reply from the half-breed, and while he was still undecided a burst of gunfire reopened the attack. A wild yell came from Chris Dolan who was, except for the crippled Dan Macklin, alone at the front wall. Kincaid ran to join those two, and soon the barrel of his rifle grew hot as he drove shot after shot at the muzzle flashes of the Ute guns among the rocks.

They were under fire from the rocks for perhaps ten minutes; then the Indians abruptly broke off the fight again. Once more the night became tautly silent. Kincaid lifted an arm and wiped sweat from his face with his shirt sleeve. Only slowly did the tension in him

ease, and then not completely.

He was afraid to ask, but finally he called out, "Chris? Macklin? Are you all right?"

Dolan said sourly, "All right? I'm fine. But Macklin stopped another slug."

"How bad is he?"

"How should I know?"

"Take a look, can't you?" Kincaid said, and looked toward the shadowy figure of the man who now came to take a place near him at the wall. It was Sanchez, his left arm bandaged and in a sling. He asked, "Are you all right, Sanchez?"

"Like Chris, I'm fine," Sanchez said bitterly. "Just fine, for a man who's as good as dead."

"Where's that tenderfoot, Parsons?"

"Still inside, playing sick on us because of that bullet crease."

"I'll get him out here," Kincaid said. "Keep watch."

He went along the wall to where Dolan was bending over the downed Dan Macklin. Injun Charlie was standing nearby.

"He's still alive," Dolan said, "but he's sure not going to be any help to us."

MACKLIN was unconscious again. This time he'd been hit in the chest. Kincaid had the feeling that it was useless to try to do anything for him, but he told the half-breed to lend a hand, and the two of them carried him toward the house.

On the way, Kincaid said, keeping his voice low, "Have you made up your mind about taking the women out of here, Charlie?"

The half-breed swore. "If I could climb that wall in the dark, I wouldn't be here," he said.

It was answer enough. Kincaid had to agree that the man wouldn't have remained there risking his life if it were possible for him to get away. He said no more about the matter, but he could not help thinking of what was in store for the women. His spirits were already at their lowest point, and all he could feel now was despair.

Virginia was at the doorway. She asked, "Who is it, Kincaid?" and her voice reflected his despair.

"Macklin."

"Oh, the poor man!"

He said, "Yes."

He wondered if Virginia did not as yet realize that what had happened to Macklin would sooner or later happen to them all. She did not seem terrified, at least, and he decided that it was better she did not know how hopeless the situation was.

They got Macklin inside. On their way to the back room, Kincaid saw Bert Parsons—a bandage around his head and his whisky bottle in his hand—sitting on one of the benches by the table. Kincaid told him curtly to get back to his post at the wall. Virginia brought the lantern to the back and watched them lay the wounded man—the dying man, Kincaid knew—upon the bed.

"Lily and I will look after him," she said.

"Where is Lily, anyway? She didn't go outside, did she?"

"She went to see if John Forsythe is all right. She's worried about him."

"She shouldn't be wandering about. She could get hit by a stray bullet. You tell her."

Virginia nodded. "I will," she said, "but it will do no good." She smiled faintly. "Lily's afraid of nothing except that John may be afraid. She's taken a real interest in him, Kincaid."

He said, marveling, "That Lily—and a man like him?"

He left the room, followed by Injun Charlie. He heard Lily's voice, angry and loud, as he crossed the now dark main room. She was out on the gallery. When he stepped from the house he saw that it was Bert Parsons with her.

She was saying, in an outraged voice, "From now on you keep your hands to yourself!"

Parsons said, "Since when did your sort get to be so lily pure?"

Kincaid walked toward them, saying, "Thinking about women at a time like this!" His tone was heavy with disgust. "Parsons, you get over to the wall like I told you. Lily, you quit prowling out here." He started the drummer on his way with a shove.

There was gunfire now from the base of the cliff, west of the station. The Indians there were those who had earlier made the mounted charge at the station. Their position flanked the men at the wall, but Forsythe fired on them from the roof of the house, and his shooting was so accurate that the Utes moved out

toward their companions among the rocks.

There was a concentrated fire from there now, and Kincaid estimated that at least forty warriors were besieging the station. He'd been wrong in thinking that heavy losses would force the hostiles to quit the fight. They'd set out to take the place, and they were willing to pay the price.

They kept up their heavy fire for some minutes, then settled down to a harassing sniping. First one Indian would drive a shot at the station, then another. The shots were spaced at intervals of about ten seconds, and each came from a different position. Kincaid and the others could do no more than fire at the muzzle flash of each hidden gun.

He became aware that Bert Parsons's rifle was silent, so he moved along the wall to the man's post. He found Parsons crouched down, keeping himself safe.

Kincaid prodded him with his rifle, swore, and said, "Come alive, man. You're not going to save yourself this way." He watched the drummer slowly come erect. Then he said, with disgust, "There's something you can do to help. Go to the house, to the room where we took Macklin. You'll find ammunition in a cupboard there. Bring a half-dozen boxes, and hand them around. Give a box to Drumgold and one to Forsythe while you're at it."

Parsons muttered something under his breath, but started off willingly enough. There was no lull in the sniping. The Utes tried another tactic now; a shot would come from the rocks and, when the men at the station answered it, several Indians fired at the flash of their guns. This made for more accurate shooting by the Utes, and Kincaid heard slugs shriek close by each time he fired a shot. There was little to be gained in such fighting, so he passed word to the others to hold their fire until they had definite targets.

The Indians kept up their sniping and yelled taunts, now that there was no answering fire. Kincaid wondered how long it would be before they tried some other tactic. He knew they would not let the stalemate continue.

PARSONS had taken his own good time getting the ammunition, but now he came and placed four boxes of cartridges on the wall. He was breathing hard—whether from exertion or because of the pressure of his fear, Kincaid did not know. He turned away at once, without a word, going to his own post farther along the wall.

Kincaid kept two of the boxes for his own use and took the others to the men beyond the gate. Sanchez was in no need of ammunition; he had only his revolver, and was holding his fire because the range was too long for accurate shooting with a hand gun. Beyond Sanchez, Chris Dolan was peering out into the darkness and muttering to himself.

"Are you using forty-fours, Chris?"

"Yeah."

Kincaid placed a box on the wall within reach of the outlaw's hand. "You'll probably need these."

"Yeah, and then some," Dolan said. "The Indians will be moving in closer soon."

The wall farther along was unprotected. "Where's Charlie?" Kincaid asked.

"How should I know? Maybe he's left us in the lurch."

Kincaid peered about the yard. He saw nothing of the half-breed, and got no answer when he called the man's name.

He searched along the wall, expecting to find Injun Charlie lying dead there. He found no body. He stood puzzling over this until the Utes began shooting in unison again. He returned to his own post, and a moment later a dozen warriors broke from cover and charged at the station. They aimed at the gate, screaming their war cries.

Some of them reached it, despite the heavy fire Kincaid, Dolan and Sanchez poured into them. One warrior actually scaled the gate. He was hit by a shot from either Forsythe's or Drumgold's rifle, but not before he had dropped into the yard. The others tried to force the gate. Then, failing, they began to retreat.

They were shooting as they went, and the rest of the band kept up a heavy fire from the rocks to cover them. Only five survivors got back to the rocks. Then the screaming and howling ceased and the Ute guns fell silent.

It had been close, too close. Kincaid's heart was thumping from fright. If several warriors had gotten inside and managed to open the gate, it would have been the end. The others would have come pouring in, and taken the

station. Dolan called to Kincaid, his voice reflecting his own fright.

Dolan asked, "Are you still with us?"

"Yes. How about Sanchez?"

"He came through it," Dolan said. "We downed seven Indians. Why can't that be a bellyful of fighting for them?"

That called for no answer, and Kincaid turned in the other direction to see if the drummer was safe. He saw nothing of him, and got no reply when speaking his name. He moved along the wall, passed Hank Weaver's body, and stumbled over Parsons. The drummer, too, was dead.

He was still kneeling by Parsons's body when a woman's scream rang out from the house. His first wild thought was that some of the Utes had gotten into the station, perhaps over the rear wall, and had attacked Virginia or Lily. Fear had him by the throat as he started across the yard at a run.

He saw no Indians as he drew close to the house, however. It was Virginia who had screamed, and she stood alone in the doorway. Ben Drumgold appeared from the direction of the barn, having made a hasty descent of the ladder, and Lew Thorpe loomed through the darkness from the rear wall. Reaching the gallery, Kincaid pulled up short, on seeing the reason for Virginia's terror.

A man was sprawled on the ground directly in front of the door. It was Injun Charlie, and Kincaid knew, even as he knelt beside the man, that he was dead. He struck a match, however, and had a quick look. He felt sickened.

There was much blood, and a bloody knife —a butcher knife from the kitchen—lay beside the body. Injun Charlie had been stabbed in the throat. He'd died instantly, without a sound and without a struggle. Kincaid killed the match flame, rose, and looked at Virginia. Lily was with her now, a comforting arm around her.

"What happened?" he said. "He didn't—"

Virginia shook her head. "No, it wasn't I," she said, and shuddered. "I came to the door and saw him there like that."

Drumgold went to her, stepping carefully around the dead man. He took her right hand between both his own and spoke softly to her. She turned toward him so that she would no longer see the dead man. Chris Dolan came running and halted beside Thorpe, and after him came Sanchez. John Forsythe looked down from the edge of the roof, asking what had happened. The Utes were forgotten, even by Kincaid. He looked from face to face, wondering which of them had murdered the half-breed, and why.

DOLAN found the answer. He stooped and picked something off the ground, uttered a startled grunt, then quickly struck a match. Kincaid saw it too now, a scattering of gold and silver coins near Injun Charlie's body. Dolan dropped the match, gathered up the money, then faced Kincaid.

"This couldn't have belonged to the breed."

"No."

"It's a part of Drumgold's thirty thousand, then."

"I guess so," Kincaid said, then stepped back from the building and looked up at Forsythe. He had remembered the Utes again, the deadly danger. "John, keep watch," he said.

"All right. But what happened?"

"Somebody killed Injun Charlie. Did you see or hear anything?"

"Only Miss Worden's scream," Forsythe said, and moved back from the edge of the roof to watch the Utes.

Dolan said, "Somebody's made off with that thirty thousand, and I want to know who. Kincaid?"

"I've been over at the front wall, and you know it, Chris."

"I don't know it. I couldn't keep track of you in the dark." He lifted his rifle and lined it on Kincaid. "I want that money, bucko. I aim to have it, no matter who gets hurt."

"You're welcome to it," Kincaid told him. He looked at Drumgold. "It's your money. What do you know about this? Did you see or hear anything?"

"I've been busy fighting the Utes, Kincaid."

"Where did you leave your saddlebags?"

"In the room you turned over to the ladies, along with their luggage."

"All right, Ben. You'd better get back to your post."

"Not yet. I want to find out what happened to my money."

Kincaid swore. "The Utes are still out there. This is no time to be worrying about money."

Chris Dolan said, "Lew, Sanchez, cover these two men." He went to the doorway, forcing Drumgold to leave Virginia and go stand with Kincaid. "If there's one move by either of them," he said, "you drop them both. I'm done fooling around with them."

Thorpe and Sanchez stood behind Kincaid and Drumgold, their guns levelled. Dolan lined his rifle on Kincaid again. "I'm going to get to the bottom of this right now," he said. "Kincaid, if you have that money, you sure made a bad mistake. Maybe you've got it stashed away where nobody can find it, but I can think up a way to make you talk."

"Chris, I never touched those saddlebags." Kincaid looked over his shoulder at Thorpe. "You were off by yourself all this time. Maybe you got the money."

"I never left the wall back there until the woman yelled," Thorpe said easily. "Try again, friend."

Kincaid thought about it for a moment. Then, looking at Dolan, he said, "The drummer. I sent Parsons to the house for ammunition. He was gone longer than he should have been. Injun Charlie was already missing then —you know that."

"So what?" Dolan said. "Keep talking."

"Charlie sneaked off," Kincaid said, "to get those saddlebags. He knew that the women were with Macklin. He went into their room for the saddlebags. Then Parsons came into the house for the cartridges and saw Charlie. So Parsons decided he'd take the money for himself.

"He didn't have his rifle with him, so he went to the kitchen and got the butcher knife. By that time Charlie was on his way out with the saddlebags. Parsons went after him and jumped him here. When Charlie fell, he dropped the saddlebags and some of the specie fell out of them. You see?"

"Maybe."

"So Parsons couldn't have hidden the money where it can't be found."

"I'll find it," Dolan said. "I came out here for that thirty thousand, and I'm not leaving without it. I figure Drumgold owes it to me. He fired me from my job on his ranch, then blacklisted me with the other ranchers so I couldn't land another riding job. Yeah, I figure he owes it to me, and I'm going to have it!" He gestured with his rifle. "Lew, you and Sanchez keep him and Drumgold covered. I'm going after that drummer."

"Don't bother," Kincaid said. "Parsons is dead."

Dolan sneered. "That's mighty convenient for you, Kincaid. A dead man can't deny that he's a thief, can he? Sanchez, you go see if those saddlebags are with the drummer's body. And hurry it up."

Sanchez went off across the yard, returning shortly, empty-handed. He said, "He's dead, all right, but there's no signs of the saddlebags, Chris. We'll have to tear this place apart."

"I'll tear it apart, all right," Dolan said. "You help Lew hold these men here."

He turned to the doorway and gestured at Virginia with his rifle. "You get over with those two," he told her. When she hesitated, he lifted his voice to a shout. "Come on, come on, move!"

Virginia stepped out from the doorway. She seemed in a state of shock, and moved like a dazed person. Lily started to follow her, but Dolan caught her by the arm.

"You're coming with me," he said. "I've had my eye on you, honey."

He shoved her violently when she tried to break away, then kicked the door shut once they were inside. Soon Kincaid saw a moving reflection of light against the windows, as Dolan began his search. The outlaw was no doubt forcing Lily to carry the lantern to light his way.

Kincaid silently cursed Dolan for letting his greed blind him to their danger. The Utes could have taken the station during the past few minutes, with little trouble; they could still take it, if only they knew the foolhardiness of its few defenders. Kincaid blamed Chris Dolan, but knew that the hardcase wasn't alone in letting greed make him forget the threat of the Utes.

Lew Thorpe and Sanchez were as foolhardy as Dolan, and Ben Drumgold too had shown himself more concerned about the missing money than about the proximity of death. And there was Injun Charlie, murdered by Parsons because of the money. That the half-breed had stolen the saddlebags seemed strange indeed,

for he'd had no more hope than Kincaid that anyone would escape with his life. Unless, Kincaid thought, Injun Charlie had believed that he could get away. He must have held such a belief, in spite of his denying to Kincaid that there was a way out; otherwise he wouldn't have taken the saddlebags.

SUDDENLY Kincaid saw how it had been with the half-breed. Injun Charlie had forgotten about the climb up the canyon wall until asked, by Kincaid, if there were no way to get the women to safety. It had been recalled to his mind then. He'd immediately regretted telling Kincaid, and so had denied that he could find his way up the cliffs in the darkness.

From that moment on, Injun Charlie had planned to save himself, and to take Drumgold's thirty thousand dollars with him. But for Bert Parsons, also a man whose greed was greater than his good sense, the half-breed would now be well on his way to safety. Kincaid thought, the canyon wall can be climbed, so there is a chance for the women!

That moment a scream rang out from within the house. Kincaid swore and took a step toward the door. He stopped short when Lew Thorpe said, "Easy, there!" and jabbed him in the back with his rifle.

The door was jerked open and Lily Marvin came running from the house, stumbling over Injun Charlie's body in her panicky haste. Virginia went to meet her, ignoring a growled protest from Sanchez.

"Lily, are you all right?"

Lily nodded jerkily. She was bady upset and trembling violently. The older woman put her arms about her. "I killed him," she said wildly. "He's lying dead in there!"

Sanchez swore, and Thorpe said, "That does it. He had to fool around with this flossy." Then, to the girl, he asked, "What happened between you two?"

"He found the money," Lily said, her voice still loud and off key. "He went through the drummer's bag, then searched through the rest of the luggage. The saddlebags were in my trunk, hidden under my clothes!" She was close to being hysterical. "I didn't put them there, but Dolan accused me of stealing that money. He slapped me and—"

"Parsons hid the saddlebags there, Lily," Kincaid said. "He would have gotten them back when you people reached Robles—if the two of you had came out of this alive. He must have figured that your trunk wouldn't be searched. Anyway, don't let it worry you. As for Dolan, it's good riddance if he is dead."

"He is!" Lily said. "I hit him twice with the lantern, once in the face and once over the head!"

Sanchez said, "I'll go have a look, Lew. If he's dead—"

"I'm going along," Thorpe told him. "I'm not giving you a chance to stash those saddlebags away for yourself, if Chris should be dead."

"What about these people?"

"They're not going anywhere," Thorpe said. "Come on."

They'd no sooner gone into the now completely dark house than Kincaid turned to Drumgold. "I doubt if she did Dolan in," he said. "He's not that easy to kill. Get the women up on the roof with Forsythe, and tell him to pull the ladder up after him. I don't want them where Dolan can get at them, if he is still alive."

He turned toward the rear of the yard before Drumgold could reply. He went at a run. Reaching the wall back there, he pulled himself to its top and then dropped to the ground on the outside. He stood there for a moment, gripped by a fear he couldn't quite shake off. Then, revolver in hand, he moved to the cliff wall and turned west along its base. His imagination played tricks on him, making him feel that every brush thicket and cluster of rocks concealed a Ute.

He was alone here, however, in the narrow strip between station and cliff. In less than ten minutes he came to the crevice in the wall, a fissure wide enough at its entrance to have admitted a wagon and team. It narrowed after he'd taken a half-dozen steps into it, and soon was little wider than the breadth of his shoulders.

He found a craggy slope and, holstering his gun, began to climb. About eighty feet above the canyon floor, he came to a narrow ledge which slanted sharply upward along the face of the cliff. He explored no farther. He would have to rely on the dead half-breed's word that

the ledge did lead to the rim of the canyon, another two hundred feet above.

He made his way back down the slope to the depths of the pocket, then moved out of the crevice and headed back to the station. Minutes later he eased himself over the station wall, and heard a voice lifted in angry complaint over by the house. It was Chris Dolan's voice, and that was no great surprise to Kincaid. He hadn't believed that Lily had killed the outlaw, even by two hefty blows with a lantern.

He saw them when he got as far as the well. They stood on the gallery, Dolan and the other two. Dolan's voice was angry enough, but there was a lack of force to his monologue. Evidently the man hadn't wholly recovered from the blows Lily had dealt him. He was slumped against the wall, just beyond the doorway.

"Damn it, I want her," Kincaid heard him say. "She tried to kill me. I want her. Do you hear?"

None of the others was in sight, so Kincaid took it for granted that Drumgold had gotten the two women up on the roof with Forsythe

Lew Thorpe said, "Forget her, Chris. You're alive, and we've got the thirty thousand. Let's think about clearing out of here."

"Not before I settle with that flossy!"

"Now, listen, Chris," Thorpe said. But then, thinking better of it, he fell silent.

Kincaid called out, "Yeah, Chris, why don't you clear out?" He drew his revolver and lined it on the outlaw. "Take the money and make a run for it, and let the rest of us try to defend ourselves."

THEY stared at him. Then Dolan shoved away from the wall and took a half-dozen unsteady steps toward him. His right hand lay on the butt of his holstered gun. The saddlebags were slung over his left shoulder. He'd lost his hat, and Kincaid saw blood on the side of his face.

"Where have you been?" Dolan demanded. "I've been looking for you."

"I've been prowling."

"Prowling for what?"

"To find out what the Utes are up to. What else?"

"Well, what are they up to?"

"They're waiting, Chris, just waiting."

"And you figure that the three of us should ride out and be targets for them, eh?"

"Either that or come to your senses and help us stand them off when they attack again," Kincaid said. "Chris, I'm getting sick and tired of your fooling around with that money when the lives of all of us are at stake. If you three want to make a run for it, Drumgold and Forsythe and I will try to cover you."

It was Thorpe who asked, "Why would you do that, friend?"

"The rest of us will have more of a chance once you three are off our backs," Kincaid told him. "With Dolan messing things up, the Utes could take this place right now if they tried."

Thorpe considered that, then said, "Sanchez, what do you think?"

"I say we make a run for it," Sanchez replied, "and the sooner the better."

Thorpe walked over to Dolan. "What about it, Chris?"

"I'm for it," Dolan said. "Here's how we'll work it."

The three of them got together and discussed their escape attempt. Dolan's plan was simply to saddle their horses, open the gate, ride out at a gallop and head east through the canyon. The Utes would be too taken by surprise to open fire immediately.

And since the Indians' ponies had been left west through the canyon, beyond the cliff shoulder, it would be some little while before they could start out in pursuit. Dolan and Sanchez would take the horses to the gate, and Thorpe would swing the gate open at the very last moment. Thorpe did not like his part of the scheme. He argued that his having to mount there would slow them up.

Kincaid said, "Lew is right. I'll open the gate for you. The three of you can mount at the barn and then ride out at a gallop."

They stared at him again. Thorpe said, "No tricks?"

"No tricks, Lew."

"I don't trust you, somehow, Kincaid."

Kincaid eased the trigger of his Colt off cocked position, holstered the gun, and walked over to them. "I told you that I want you three off my back," he said. "As for the thirty thousand, I'm not interested. I don't care what happens to it. Stay or leave; it's up to you.

But if you stay, quit fooling around and let the rest of us stand ready to fight the Utes. You've forgotten them, but they haven't forgotten us—even though they are quiet right now." He paused. Then, his voice edged with anger, he said, "You have the money. Be satisfied. Leave me and the others alone."

"All right," Thorpe said. "You open the gate."

"Call out when you're ready," Kincaid said, and left them.

He went to the side of the house and had Forsythe lower the ladder. He climbed until he could see onto the roof. Forsythe crouched at the edge, balancing himself with his rifle. The two women sat well back, close together.

"You and the women are getting out of here, John," he said. "Dolan and the other two are riding out shortly, and you'll leave when they start out. You'll go over the back wall. Now listen closely."

He told the young man how to find the crevice in the cliff, the rocky slope deep within the hollow, and the ledge that ran up the canyon wall.

"Once you're out of the canyon, head west," he said. "Keep on the move until daylight, then go into hiding until nightfall. When you start out again, swing south until you reach the road. Be careful you don't miss it in the dark. Follow the road west until you reach the Rock Creek station. That's about twenty miles from here. Got it?"

Forsythe nodded, then asked, "What about you and Mr. Drumgold?"

"We'll keep the Utes busy as long as we can."

"But—"

"No argument," Kincaid cut in. "One thing more. Send Miss Worden down. Tell her to pack some food in a flour sack. She'll find a canteen in the kitchen. Have her fill it at the well."

"All right," Forsythe said. "And, Kincaid—"

"Yes?"

"I'm to blame for all this. Don't think I don't realize that."

"Forget that. Don't blame yourself."

"If only I hadn't killed that old man. Actually, I should stay here and let you or Mr. Drumgold go with the ladies."

Kincaid said, "I don't see it that way, John. Now be ready to leave when those three toughhands ride out. And good luck to you."

HE SAW as he left the ladder that Dolan and his companions had talked themselves out and were now moving toward the barn. He found Drumgold keeping watch at the front wall, and told him about the way up the canyon, and that Forsythe was to try to get the women safely away. As he talked, he sensed the building up of an angry resentment in the man.

"Forsythe?" Drumgold said. "Why him?"

"Why not him?" Kincaid said.

"He's responsible for this mess, and you damn well know it."

"He caused it, sure. But he shouldn't be blamed, and he shouldn't be made to pay for what was only a mistake. Somebody has to go with the women, and as I see it he's the right one. He has his whole life ahead of him. As for you, Ben, you've crowded a lot of living into the years you've had. And you've lived high, wide and handsome. You had your chance and made the best of it. So now Forsythe gets his chance."

"And you get yours, damn you."

"What does that mean, Ben?"

"Is this your way of working off your grudge against me?" Drumgold said. He turned to face Kincaid squarely. "Suppose I won't agree to letting Forsythe go?"

"Ben, don't try to cross me," Kincaid said. That moment he heard a sound that started hope swelling in him.

Drumgold too heard it, and said, "Listen!" Excitement roiled in his voice.

There was a drumming of hoofs, and the noise of many horses. Dolan and his companions came hurrying from the barn. Dolan called out, "Riders coming, Kincaid! You think it could be cavalrymen?"

That was the hope at which Kincaid grasped—a cavalry detail from Fort Sands. It was not too much to hope for, he told himself. After all, this road was patrolled, not regularly, but fairly often. His hope died at once. The horsemen appeared around the base of the cliff shoulder, and even in the darkness Kincaid saw that they were Indians, at least thirty of them.

They swung off the road and into the rocks where the other Utes were hidden. They ran their ponies to the far side of the canyon, uttering wild yells that were echoed by the original band. These Indians were from another village, Kincaid knew; they had been summoned by a courier, of course. There would be others coming in from other villages, almost certainly. The yelling continued across the canyon, and some shots were fired as the two groups went through some sort of a welcoming ceremony.

Hope had come and so swiftly gone again that Kincaid felt suddenly empty inside. It was as though the heart had gone out of him. The end would come soon, now that there were overwhelming numbers out there. There would be much gunfire for a little while, and then a wild charge that would take the station. And finally nothing.

Dolan said, "Come on, come on. Let's get out of here, fast!" With Thorpe and Sanchez, he returned to the barn at a run.

Kincaid said, "Ben, you'd better go say goodbye to Miss Worden. She's probably in the kitchen now." He watched the man turn away, then said, "And, Ben, don't get the notion that you're taking Forsythe's place. If you try to leave, I'll put a slug in you—so help me."

Drumgold had turned. He stared at Kincaid with hatred.

Kincaid said, "Another thing. You can make it easier for Miss Worden by telling her that we'll come along later—after they've gotten a head start."

"Is there something personal in your concern for the lady?" Drumgold said, and let sarcasm edge his tone. "Maybe you'd like to say good-bye to her?" In a wicked temper, he started across the yard.

At the far side of the canyon, beyond the jumble of rocks, a fire suddenly blossomed and painted the nearby cliff with flickering reds and yellows. Chanting in unison, some of the Utes began to gyrate about the first in a ceremonial dance. The beat of a war drum sounded next. The writhing shadows of the Utes played against the far canyon wall, huge and grotesque.

In the barn, working in the thick blackness, Chris Dolan and his companions saddled their horses. Dolan had the girl on his mind again, and he muttered complainingly, "All I wanted was half an hour with that flossy. I'd show her a thing or two."

Sanchez kept cursing, for saddling a horse with only one hand was difficult.

Lew Thorpe worried aloud, "We'll need luck to make it—the devil's own luck."

ON THE roof of the station house, young John Forsythe was a victim of self-doubt, of fear and guilt. He was afraid that he wouldn't measure up to what Kincaid expected of him. He could not rid his mind of the knowledge that he was to blame for the disaster that had struck here—for the deaths of Hank Weaver, Bert Parsons, Dan Macklin, and even Injun Charlie.

Lily had told him that Mr. Macklin had died shortly before Miss Worden discovered the half-breed's body. Forsythe felt guilty for the half-breed's death along with the others, telling himself the man wouldn't have been murdered but for the situation which he had brought about with his shooting of the old Indian. There were the dead Utes too—so many of them. Forsythe had them on his conscience.

And he was troubled too about Kincaid and Drumgold, knowing that they faced certain death. Two men could not hold off the horde of Indians that would sooner or later rush the station. He understood, of course, that someone must remain behind to hold off the Utes for as long as possible, so that the women could be gotten away.

He did wonder why he should be the one to go with Lily and Miss Worden. It had been Kincaid's decision, he supposed. And he would be forever grateful to the tall, grim man. His fear was that he might fail to get the women to safety, and he could not shake off this idea. Lily sat close him now, there by the edge of the roof. She knew about his doubts. He'd spoken of them to her.

Now Lily gripped his arm and whispered, "It'll be all right, John. There's no need to worry. You'll see." It was as though she were giving him some of her fine courage.

Moving about the kitchen in the darkness, Virginia managed to find an empty sack and a canteen. Into the sack she put a dozen or so

leftover biscuits, some jerky, and a small amount of dried apple slices. This was the extent of the food on hand that could be eaten without cooking. Virginia knew that she and Lily and John Forsythe would have no time to fix a meal during their flight; nor would they dare have a fire upon which to cook even coffee.

Carrying sack and canteen, she left the house and, shuddering as she walked around Injun Charlie's body, went to the well to fill the canteen. She could hear the half-angry muttering of the outlaws in the barn. She heard, too, the distant beat of a drum and the wild cries of the Indians. She had filled the canteen from the well bucket when she became aware of someone crossing the yard in her direction.

She turned and said, "Kincaid?"

"It's Ben, Virginia." He came on, halted before her, and continued, "If it's Kincaid you want to see, I'll send him to you."

She could have bitten off her tongue for the mistake. "I merely thought—well, it's so dark, I wasn't sure. Of course, it's you I want to see."

He studied her in silence for a long moment, then said, with a trace of bitterness, "Something's gone wrong between us, Ginny. It's not like it was in Denver. What's happened? Has he been telling you things about me?"

"No, Ben. He won't say anything about you."

"So you've questioned him," he said accusingly.

She felt her cheeks grow hot. "I'm sorry, but I did ask him why he hates you. I shouldn't have, I suppose."

"It hardly matters now," he told her, but not forgivingly. "He told me I'd better say good-bye to you. He seems to have you on his mind."

"Good-bye? Ben, aren't you coming away too?" She gripped his arm. "You and Kincaid?"

He was well aware that the thing wrong between them was the loss of her respect for him. He needed to regain her high opinion of himself, and for an instant he toyed with the idea of letting her believe that he did intend to remain behind—which was not, despite Kincaid, his intention at all.

Then he saw the cruelty of it, and so he said, "We'll come along after you've had a chance to climb the cliff. Kincaid and I will keep firing on the Utes so they don't suspect what we're up to. It's the only way, Ginny."

"But, Ben, if you should wait too long—"

"I won't wait too long, Ginny."

He felt very tender toward her just then. He reached out and gently touched her cheek. "I'll catch up with you," he said. "I promise."

One of the hardcases came from the barn, leading his horse. It was Thorpe, and he called, "All right, Kincaid, open the gate!"

Kincaid called back, "Give me a minute, Lew." Then, more loudly, he added, "John, are you ready?" And, "Ben, get over here!"

Dolan and Sanchez came from the barn, mounted. Thorpe mounted too, drew his revolver. Dolan also had his gun in his hand.

Drumgold said, "This is it, Ginny," and hastily kissed her. "You and the others travel as fast as you can. Don't slow down to wait for me—for Kincaid and me. We'll catch up." He left her and started across the yard.

Over at the side of the house, John Forsythe made hasty descent of the ladder, and covered the three riders with his rifle as Lily followed him. Those three paid no attention to him or to the girl: Dolan wildly excited, yelled at Kincaid to get the gate open.

At the wall, Kincaid removed the bar from its sockets and swung both sections of the gate open. He called, "All right," moved aside, and picked up his rifle.

SHOD hoofs racketed across the yard, and the three riders crowded each other as they galloped toward the gate. The war dance across the canyon had already come to an abrupt halt, as though the Utes had some foreknowledge of what was happening. Sanchez was first through the gate, swinging his racing horse east along the road. A Ute gun flashed, and Kincaid drove a shot at the spurt of powder flame. Wild yells lifted, and now the night erupted into fury.

Thorpe was through the gate an instant after Sanchez, and by some miracle—or freak accident—those two were untouched by the raking fire from the rocks. Dolan was not so lucky. He and his horse went down in a thrashing heap just outside the gate. Kincaid saw all this from the corner of his eye

as he fired shot after shot at the Utes.

As he fired the last round in the Winchester and began to reload, Drumgold opened fire over at the east side of the gate. Sanchez and Thorpe were already out of sight, lost in the darkness out through the canyon. Dolan lay unmoving beside his dead horse.

Bringing his rifle into action again, Kincaid had riders for targets. A dozen or more of the Utes who had ridden into the canyon a short time ago were now in pursuit of Sanchez and Thorpe. He fired five times into the bunch, and saw two people topple from their mounts. The others were out of range then, vanishing in the direction taken by the two outlaws.

The Utes who remained kept up a heavy fire for what seemed an eternity. Then their shooting slackened to sniping once more. Kincaid held his fire, waiting for the rush that would bring the Indians swarming through the gateway. There was no closing the gate, with Dolan and the dead horse lying there. Drumgold too stopped shooting, and after a time called to Kincaid.

"How long has it been?"

"Ten minutes, maybe."

"Seems longer."

"Yes," said Kincaid.

He knew that Forsythe and the women might have entered the crevice by now, but couldn't as yet have begun to climb. Like Drumgold, he wanted the time to pass swiftly. He wanted the three to be well on their way out of the canyon before the end came. Of the three, it was Virginia Worden he thought of mostly. She was really still a stranger to him, but he felt that he knew her well. In the space of a few hours she had become important to him.

When Nora was his wife, he'd believed that he gave all his love to her, that he would never have more to give to another woman. When he'd learned, in prison, that she was divorcing him, he'd realized that his caring so deeply for her had been a mistake. He'd loved the woman he imagined Nora to be, deceiving himself into believing that she, like

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himself, wanted only good to come of their marriage.

He wasn't sure now that Nora had known what she wanted, except finally escape from what had seemed to her a life of boredom. He did not hate her for that; he had simply stopped feeling anything for her. So it was possible that he was falling in love with Virginia. At any rate, she alone, of all the people in the world, was in his thoughts now, when the end was so close.

He did give some thought to Drumgold, and found it strange that the two of them should be facing death together—strange, but somehow proper. He had little to live for; he had been stripped of all that had given meaning to his life, and there was no one who cared whether he lived or died. And Drumgold, who had everything to live for, including Virginia, deserved no better than to die at the hands of the Utes.

There should be some sort of retribution, it seemed to Kincaid. A man should be rewarded for the good he did, and punished for his wrongs. So it was proper enough that Ben Drumgold and he were together now, and strange only because if he, Kincaid, could have chosen who was to be there with him, it would have been this man. It was as though Drumgold had been delivered into his hands.

Minutes passed, quite a few minutes. The Utes who had ridden after the two fleeing men did not return. Those who remained across the canyon—the larger number—fired fewer and fewer shots. No wave of warriors came charging across the open space leading to the gate. They had lost heavily; perhaps they no longer had the courage to expose themselves recklessly. Perhaps they were running short of ammunition.

The longer they held off the final attack, the farther up the canyon wall Forsythe and Lily and Virginia would be. How long it would take them to climb three hundred feet of treacherous cliff, he could not guess. He turned and peered at the canyon wall, but it was merely a dark mass of rock. He could see no movement anywhere upon its sheer face.

Drumgold left his position and moved to the gateway. Kincaid watched his shadowy shape for a moment, then said, "What are you up to? The Utes will spot you, you fool!"

There was no immediate reply from the cattleman, but finally he said, "Dolan's still alive. He's out cold, but he's still breathing."

"Get away from there, Ben!"

"In a minute," Drumgold said. He bent over the dead horse and pulled at something. A moment later he ducked back behind the wall. "Got them. Dolan wasn't so smart, after all."

Kincaid knew then that he'd gotten the saddlebags off the dead animal. He said, "Ben, you must be crazy, worrying about money at a time like this!"

"The money's mine. I have a right to it."

"Sure. But what good is it to you?"

There was no reply to that.

The fire around which the Utes had done their war dance suddenly flared up again, and Kincaid could see the shadows of several warriors on the far canyon wall. Soon he saw the flicker of several other fires among the rocks, much closer to the station.

He called to Drumgold, "Watch it. They're going to pull something!"

IT CAME as he spoke, a flight of flame-tipped arrows. The Utes shot the arrows high into the air so that they fell within the station. Most dropped within the yard harmlessly, but one landed on top of the stagecoach, and several on the roofs of the house and barn. Those striking the buildings burned out, but within a matter of minutes the top of the old Concord coach was a mass of flames.

More of the fiery missiles came arching through the darkness, some of these dropping onto the buildings. The stagecoach began to burn with a great roar and crackle, flames leaping high. Kincaid knew that he and Drumgold would be limned against the glare behind them, easy targets for the Utes. He called to the man, telling him to move back to the house.

He saw Drumgold hurry across the yard and started after him, then turned back upon hearing an outcry from Chris Dolan.

Dolan was trying to rise. Failing in that, he began to crawl. Kincaid hesitated a moment. Then, swearing under his breath, he went to the man. He helped Dolan to his

feet, and now the Ute guns opened up again. He could hear the shriek of the slugs. He had to support most of Dolan's weight as they started across the yard. There was no strength in the outlaw. He was bleeding from a wound at his left temple and seemed badly dazed.

The roof of the barn had caught fire, and Kincaid, with a thought to the horses in the building, headed for there immediately after getting Dolan to the doorway of the house. Twelve horses were in the barn, and he backed them from their stalls one by one, then drove them in a bunch from the building.

With shouts and a couple of revolver shots, he started them running toward the gate. They circled wide about the flaming stagecoach; then the leaders of the bunch balked at the gate because of the dead animal there. They hesitated only for a moment. Spooked by both Kincaid and the fire, they went past the dead horse at a run.

There were excited yells from the Utes. Some of the more venturesome broke from cover in an attempt to capture the horses. While they were so occupied, Kincaid made a running trip to the front wall for what was left of his supply of cartridges, a half-filled box. Returning to the house, he picked up his rifle, which he'd propped against the wall before going to the barn. Dolan sat in the doorway, holding his bloody head in his hands.

Kincaid stepped past him. Inside, he called, "Ben?"

There was no reply from Drumgold, and Kincaid knew at once that there was no use looking further for the man. Drumgold had gone over the rear wall and was on his way to safety up the canyon wall.

The night was no longer sooty black, but glaringly bright. Both the stagecoach and the barn roof burned wildly, and the light of the twin fires pushed back the darkness. Kincaid no longer needed to fumble his way about, even inside the house. He went to the back room that had been his spartan-bare living quarters for the past six months.

He'd forgotten Dan Macklin, and now saw that the man had died of his wounds. From the cupboard, Kincaid took a half-filled bottle

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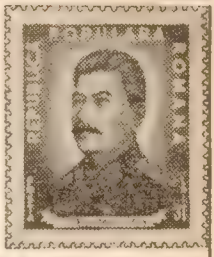

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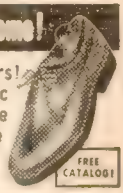

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of whisky. From a chest which held his few personal effects, he took a clean white shirt. He returned to the doorway, where Chris Dolan still sat hunched over, his head in his hands.

Kincaid said, "Put your head up, Chris," and then used whisky to cleanse his head injuries.

One deep cut was from Lily's hitting him with the lantern. The other, the more recent one, was at his left temple, and was more serious. He'd no doubt hit his head against a sharp rock when going down with his horse in the gateway.

Kincaid handed the bottle to the outlaw, said, "Take a pull on that," then tore his clean shirt into strips for a bandage.

By the time Kincaid had Dolan's head bandaged, the bottle was about empty, and the whisky was giving the outlaw a false strength. He thanked Kincaid with a curse.

Kincaid replaced the fired shells in his revolver and filled the magazine of his rifle with cartridges. He looked out across the yard. The stagecoach was a fiery skeleton now, about to collapse. The barn roof burned furiously. Portions of it had fallen in, touching off small fires within the building.

The Utes continued to shoot fire arrows at the station. One landed close to Injun Charlie's lifeless body. The burning portion consisted of a bit of rag that no doubt was smeared with tallow from a butchered pony. It flamed a little while, then burned out.

Kincaid could see in the lurid glare the bodies of old Hank Weaver and the fat drummer, Bert Parsons, who had murdered Injun Charlie, sprawled by the front wall. He could see, with his mind's eye, his own bullet-riddled body lying here where he now stood. And suddenly he wondered, why should I stay?

It was as though a voice in his mind were demanding a logical answer. Perhaps it was fear at work in him, or merely the instinct for self-preservation. The three people he'd wanted to save were making good their escape. Drumgold had run out on him. He'd done what he could for Chris Dolan, and he could not save the station: it was doomed.

There was no reason why he should not try to save himself. And there was one good reason why he should. He'd lived for more than seven years thinking only of revenge, and when the time had come he wasn't able to kill the man he hated. And now he wanted to live and try to lead a normal life. Yes, he had a reason for trying to save himself.

HE TURNED to Dolan. "Chris, can you navigate at all?"

Dolan looked up at him, his eyes narrowed and cunning. "There's a way out of here, isn't there?"

"If you can take it."

"You dirty—"

"Quit that. We have no time to waste."

"You let the others get away, but you let me and Sanchez and Lew ride out to buck those Utes guns."

"Are you coming with me?"

"You're damn right," Dolan said.

He drained the whisky bottle to the last drop, then flung it from him. He got to his feet with no great effort; for a man who'd been knocked out he'd made a surprisingly quick recovery. Or perhaps it wasn't surprising, since he was case-hardened in every way.

"Drumgold's gone, eh?"

"He's gone. He ran out on us."

"With the money?"

"You know Ben Drumgold," Kincaid said. "Get going, Chris. Over the back wall, then west along the cliff until you come to a crevice. Back in the crevice there's a slope that leads to a ledge. The ledge will take you to the canyon's rim. I'll catch up with you before long."

Dolan stared at him with quick suspicion. "You're a tricky cuss, Kincaid. What are you up to now? Did you get those saddlebags yourself, maybe?"

"I'm going to do what the Utes haven't been able to do," Kincaid told him. "Fire the house. Maybe it'll make them think that we died in there, and keep them from looking further for us. Now move along."

He went into the house and found a nearly full five-gallon can of coal oil at the kitchen end of the main room. He poured the coal oil onto the plank floor, then touched it off with a match. He waited a few minutes until the flames began to spread, then left the house.

AMBUSH CANYON

Dolan was nowhere in sight. Kincaid paused on the gallery and looked across the flame-lit yard. The Utes were still shooting fire arrows, trying to touch off the roof of the house. The interior of the barn was now a roaring inferno. The stagecoach had collapsed while he was inside, and was now but a heap of red-glowing embers.

He saw the sprawled and lifeless bodies, looking longest at that of Injun Charlie—a man with whom he'd lived and worked for six months and had never gotten to know. He turned away then, toward the back wall, and left the place to the Utes.

He made his way to the crevice at a dog-trot. Dolan's voice challenged him immediately after he entered it. "Is that you, Kincaid?" the outlaw asked, from the blackness of the fissure. None of the fire's glare reached back to this place.

"It's me," Kincaid said, and made his way to the narrow depths of the crevice.

He saw Dolan on the slope, halted not far up it. Evidently the outlaw's strength had come and gone again, for he remained motionless and was looking down with a sort of helplessness.

"I'll need a hand here."

"All right."

Kincaid began to climb. His rifle hampered him, but he decided against abandoning it. The Utes might pick up their trail, and then he would need the weapon. His own life and the lives of those ahead of him might depend upon the Winchester.

He was almost on a level with Dolan when the outlaw burst out, "This is for holding out on me, damn you!" He looked up and saw Dolan clubbing at him with his revolver.

He tried to duck, but too late. There was an explosion of pain, even though his hat cushioned the blow. The impact caused him to lose his balance. He couldn't save himself. He went hurtling down the slope. He heard himself cry out as he fell, and heard Dolan's taunt.

"You're bait for the Utes, bucko!"

Then he landed in a crumpled heap at the base of the slope, not unconscious but stunned to the point of utter helplessness.

(To be continued in the next issue.)

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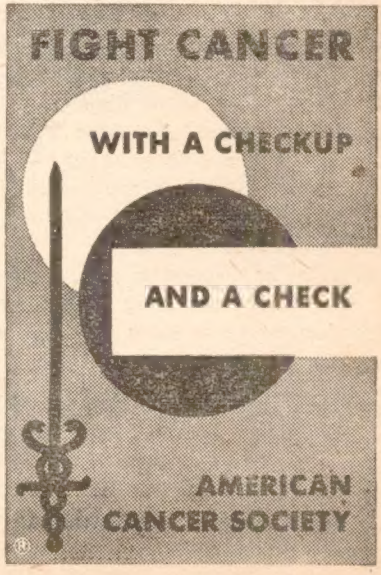

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